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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	12/08 Schools online Fridays; parents furious
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/08/us/schools-closed-fridays-remote-learning.html
GIST	DETROIT — Caitlin Reynolds, a single mother, was happy that her son, L.J., was finally settled into fourth grade after a rocky experience last year with remote learning.

Then, on Wednesday, Nov. 17, an [announcement](#): Detroit public schools would close its classrooms every Friday in December. There would be virtual school only.

On Friday, a follow-up announcement: School was also canceled starting that Monday, [for the entire week](#) of Thanksgiving. This time, there would be no online option.

“You need to take the kids back out again?” Ms. Reynolds said. “How is that not going to be harmful to these students?”

After a few months of relative calm, some public schools are going remote — or canceling classes entirely — for a day a week, or even for a couple of weeks, because of teacher burnout or staff shortages.

At least six other school districts in Michigan extended Thanksgiving break, and three districts in Washington State, including Seattle Public Schools, [unexpectedly closed on Nov. 12](#), the day after Veterans Day. In one instance, Brevard Public Schools in Florida [used leftover “hurricane days”](#) to close schools for the entire week of Thanksgiving.

In Utah, the Canyons School District [announced that all of its schools would go remote](#) one Friday a month from November until March, equivalent to more than week of school.

A few of these districts have closed with very little notice, sending parents scrambling to find child care, as well as summon the wherewithal to supervise remote learning. Beyond the logistics, many parents are worried that with additional lost days of in-person school, their children will fall further behind.

School districts cited various reasons for the temporary closings, from a rise in Covid-19 cases to a need to thoroughly sanitize classrooms. But for many schools, the remote learning days — an option that did not exist before the pandemic — are a last-ditch effort to keep teachers from resigning. They are burned out, educators said, after a year of trying to help students through learning loss, and working overtime to make up for labor shortages.

Battles in the classroom — from mask mandates to debates over critical race theory — have also taken a toll, said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the country’s second-biggest teachers’ union.

“What you hear from teachers is that it’s been too much,” she said. “And they’re trying the best that they can.”

These temporary closures, though, may only hamper relationships with parents at a moment when tensions in many districts are already high.

Because of school cancellations last academic year, Ms. Reynolds, who works at a University of Michigan research lab, had already run out of paid time off. Her mother was able to watch her fourth-grade son last Friday. But now she is scrambling to make sure someone else can be home with him every Friday this month — or lose hundreds of dollars from her paycheck.

School fights and other [outbursts from students](#) led district leaders at Reynolds Middle School, in Fairview, Ore., just east of Portland, to cancel classes from Nov. 18 until Dec. 7. They gave parents [two days’ notice](#).

“Are you kidding me?” said Missy Kisselman, the mother of Sophia, an eighth grader there. “I mean, are you kidding me?”

Ms. Kisselman, who is working out of her living room as a county case manager, said it was “nearly impossible” for her to help Sophia, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, with her schoolwork.

“I feel like, if this school knew that they were already understaffed starting this school year, it should have just stayed online,” Ms. Kisselman said.

Steven Padilla, a district spokesman, said the school was using this time to reflect on its safety protocols to “ensure that we will not have to return to short-term distance learning” in the future.

In Portland, Ore., the teachers’ union is proposing early-release days for high schoolers after they return from winter break.

Elizabeth Thiel, president of the Portland Association of Teachers, says her union is receiving an “alarming” number of inquiries from teachers asking for help resigning. If the union can figure out a plan now, she says, that may help avoid mass resignations, which would force schools to go entirely remote.

“It is far better for our students and families to be able to plan on an inconvenience like that, than it would be for the whole system to stop functioning,” Ms. Thiel said.

In Southfield, outside of Detroit, the school district [alerted parents](#) on Oct. 31, a Sunday, that it would go remote that Friday — and then every Friday until February. Kristina Morgan, whose daughter is an eighth grader at University Middle School Academy, said she found out through social media.

A single mother who works for the Wayne County court system, Ms. Morgan now spends the beginning of every week asking family members to watch her daughter, Kennedy. If she cannot find anyone, she will take the day off from work — which she says reflects poorly at the office, and makes her feel like a burden to her family.

“It’s very difficult already being a single parent, period,” she said. “But when you have your life figured out based on your child being in school during certain hours — and when I have to scramble to find child care outside of those hours, or to ask around — it’s frustrating.”

Ms. Morgan could leave her teenage daughter at home alone but was worried that she would get distracted by her phone or the internet instead of paying attention to school.

Research shows that disruptions during the pandemic led to students [falling behind](#) in math and reading, and students who were most affected by the crisis were already behind. Ms. Reynolds, the single mother from Detroit, said her son, once a straight-A math student, tested two grade levels behind when he returned to the classroom this year.

Last Friday, Theo Eggebrecht, 17, a senior in the arts track at Cass Technical High School in Detroit, did not have any at-home supplies for two of his arts classes that day. He said his science teacher did not show up for online class.

Instead, Mr. Eggebrecht spent several hours doing chores, petting his cat and scrolling through TikTok.

“I’m a senior, this is one of my last years of education,” he said. “It’s nerve-racking to miss out on that.”

Schools have not yet reached winter break, but many teachers are already burned out. It seems that many parents and students are as well.

Ms. Kisselman recalls the moment her daughter asked for help with an assignment.

“She was just in and out of the living room because her anxiety level was so high,” Ms. Kisselman said. “She’s like ‘What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to learn on my own?’”

Ms. Kisselman did not have an answer.

	"I finally just looked at her and said, 'Just don't do anything today,'" Ms. Kisselman said. "Just go into the bedroom, and just do whatever, but don't mess with school today."
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HEADLINE	12/07 Homeless camp near school to be cleared
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-public-schools-says-homeless-camp-behind-broadview-thomson-will-be-cleared
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A once-sprawling homeless encampment behind Broadview Thomson K-8 appears to be dwindling even as some said new faces are showing up and come Thursday, Seattle Public Schools confirms a cleanup will take place and the remaining tents will be removed.</p> <p>For more than a year, KOMO News has been reporting on the situation near the school and Bitter Lake that has aggravated and upset parents and neighbors, demanding either the school district, which owns the property, or the city take action. On Tuesday, notices had been stuck on nearly every tent and some nearby fencing advising of the upcoming removal of the encampment.</p> <p>"I've been here for almost a year," said Kristen Cruse. "It's a dying community. A couple new faces here and there," she added.</p> <p>Last week, 15 people transitioned to the nearby "Friendship Heights" tiny house village run by the Low Income Housing Institute off of Aurora Avenue. Cruse says she plans on going there this week.</p> <p>"We're all pretty much looking forward to moving on. "Nobody wants to live this way," she said of the conditions at the encampment. "Nobody."</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools confirms to KOMO News that city crews will begin clearing the park at 9 a.m. Thursday morning. Outreach by the city's HOPE Team continued Tuesday and since mid-September, the Human Services Department confirms that 34 referrals have been made to shelters or other housing options.</p> <p>Not everyone is keen on leaving.</p> <p>"I try to keep to myself," said a 24-year-old man at the encampment. "I'm kind of solitary."</p> <p>Originally from Spokane, that man tells KOMO News he's been homeless for the last six years – three of which he spent in Seattle. He's been living behind the school for about a month.</p> <p>"I'm 85 percent or more likely to go back to the hill," he said, referring to Capitol Hill.</p> <p>In a letter sent home to parents last week, the principal at Broadview Thomson said the following:</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools, in partnership with the City of Seattle, King County, Anything Helps, and other service provider partners have been working together to find appropriate shelter or housing for the people who have been living at the Bitter Lake encampment. We anticipate those living at the encampment since this summer to transition to shelter or housing by mid-December.</p> <p>You should expect some activity during the week of December 6 that will affect access to the Broadview Thomson School. The Bitter Lake playing field will be closed that week, and access to the school building will be limited to the main entrance on the west side of the building.</p> <p>With active support from the City of Seattle, the people who have been living at the camp now have an opportunity to move out of the elements and onto a path to break the cycle of homelessness. Seattle Public Schools and Seattle's Parks and Recreation division expect to secure and restore the Bitter Lake site by mid-December.</p>

	<p>We recognize this has been a challenging situation for our students, families, and neighbors, and are grateful for your patience and understanding.</p> <p>Neighbors who live near the school are cautiously optimistic.</p> <p>“Bitter Lake is the revolving door for the rest of the city,” said Ocean Greens. “Each time they clean a camp somewhere else in the city, people show up here. “It’s very unsafe, very inhumane. Just the whole deal is not made for neighbors, communities, kids.”</p> <p>The volunteer-led group “Anything Helps” also played a role in moving some at the encampment to the new tiny house village and its now-former director is in hot water.</p> <p>Mike Mathias confirms to KOMO News he has stepped down from his role amid allegations of mistreatment towards people who had been living at the encampment. In a text message to KOMO News, the King County Regional Homelessness Authority confirms it is investigating “serious allegations” and pending the outcome of the investigation, housing voucher referrals for that group have been frozen.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 France: 5th Covid wave not yet peaked
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-fifth-covid-wave-has-not-peaked-yet-government-2021-12-08/
GIST	<p>PARIS, Dec 8 (Reuters) - The French government spokesman Gabriel Attal said on Wednesday that the fifth wave of the COVID-19 epidemic engulfing France has not yet reached its peak.</p> <p>The seven-day moving average of new confirmed new infections set a new 2021 high of more than 44,500 on Tuesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Central America coffee crisis fuels exodus
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/coffee-crisis-central-america-fuels-record-exodus-north-2021-12-08/
GIST	<p>EL LAUREL, Honduras/LA LAGUNETA, Guatemala, Dec 8 (Reuters) - The four sons of María Bonilla and Esteban Funes all embarked on the treacherous journey north, one of them aged 10, preferring the life of an unauthorized migrant in America to a coffee farmer in Central America.</p> <p>"If I didn't have my mom, I would also go to the U.S. It's better there. Here, no one is solvent," said 40-year-old Bonilla, who's still trying to beat the odds and turn a profit at her family farm in El Laurel, northeast Honduras.</p> <p>Coffee doesn't pay for many of the hundreds of thousands of Central American farmers who produce the delicate arabica beans for the world's finest grounds. Increasingly, they are giving up, becoming part of a broader migrant flow to the U.S.-Mexico border that U.S. data shows has hit a record high this year.</p> <p>Francisca Hernández, 48, told Reuters that about a tenth of the 1,000 coffee farmers in her hamlet of La Laguneta in southern Guatemala had left this year for the United States. They included her 23-year-old son who was arrested in Mexico while trying get to the U.S. border despite having paid \$10,000 to a coyote, or people smuggler.</p> <p>He eventually made it across the border in February this year, and now works in a restaurant in Ohio, sending about \$300 a month back home.</p> <p>Migrant surges have occurred periodically from parts of Central America as fortunes fluctuated in the coffee sector, which almost 5 million people in the region - roughly 10% - rely on to survive, according to the SICA inter-governmental group.</p>

Yet this year has been particularly ruinous, according to interviews with about a dozen farmers across the region, the heads of one regional and three national coffee institutes plus an executive at a U.S.-based international coffee association.

Farmers who had been racking up losses and debts for several years from falling world prices and the loss of business to Brazil, have now been swamped by a devastating resurgence of "Roya", or coffee leaf rust disease.

The fungal pathogen has been revived by the intense humidity brought by the hurricanes Eta and Iota which ripped through Central America in late 2020, destroying crops and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

"When coffee is not doing well, that's when you see big migrations from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua," said René León-Gómez, executive secretary of PROMECAFE, a regional research network formed by the national coffee institutes of Central America.

Production in the region, where labor-intensive hand-picking of coffee is a way of life for many, has dropped by 10% since late 2017 and is expected to fall further in the season ahead. This means the global coffee market will become more dependent on mass, mechanized producers like Brazil, and increasingly vulnerable to price spikes if extreme weather hits the country's crops.

The decision of farmers to migrate north is a last resort, León-Gómez said. They have been producing at a loss for years and often also working on larger farms to make ends meet, he added.

"They're killing themselves. That's the thing."

HEADING NORTHWARDS

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) say they made 1.7 million apprehensions at the border with Mexico in the last fiscal year which ended on Sept. 30, the highest number ever recorded. That was double the level in 2019 and more than four times the number seen last year when COVID-19 lockdowns were in place.

The CBP does not break down migrants by job type, though the most recent migration data given exclusively to Reuters by the Honduran coffee institute (IHCAFE) gives some indication of the numbers involved.

The institute surveyed 990 Honduran coffee farmers and found that in three popular migration months in 2019 - May, June and July - 5.4% said at least one member of their family had left for the United States.

If that was replicated across the country's coffee farming sector, the number of migrants would equal almost 6,000 in those months alone - equivalent to 6% of all unauthorized Hondurans seeking to cross the U.S.-Mexico border during that period, according to U.S. border data.

The survey did not capture whole families that migrated so the true figure could be higher.

Honduran authorities do not have migration figures for this year, though anecdotal reports from farmers and coffee authorities across Central America suggest a similar, if not higher, proportion of this year's migrants are coffee farmers.

Bonilla said almost all the 55 or so coffee-farming families in El Laurel, in the state of Olancho, have seen members migrate over the past four years, while about 10 entire families have abandoned their farms altogether and headed north.

The CBP apprehensions data does not cover people who succeed in crossing the border illegally.

This group includes Hernández' son and Bonilla's four sons, who have all set off northwards since 2018 in search of a better life.

ROYA WREAKS RUIN

Hand-picking coffee has been a way of life for centuries in poor, mountainous parts of Central America, in areas too steep, thin-soiled or forested to grow much else. The region produces about 15% of the world's arabica, the smooth-flavored beans favored over the rougher robusta by many coffee connoisseurs.

Yet output has plunged 10% in the four years since October 2017, industry data shows, as farmers accumulated losses amid falling world coffee prices. Production is expected to fall another 3% in the current 2021/22 season, despite robust global demand and prices, industry data shows.

Prices recovered in the middle of this year due to frost and drought in Brazil and COVID-related logistics snarls, and some farmers were able to break even for the 2020/21 season that ended on Sept. 30.

Yet the farmers and officials interviewed said that, with output still falling in Central America because of the resurgent Roya disease, making a living from farming coffee will remain a struggle.

Output is just as important as price in determining profits, because it lowers costs by increasing economies of scale for inputs like seedlings, fertilizer and pesticides.

Roya first broke out in the region in 2012, and by 2014, over half of the coffee crops had been affected, before it was largely brought under control.

The humidity brought by the two hurricanes of 2020, which themselves wreaked \$3.3 billion worth of damage to regional economies, boosted the prevalence of the disease from low single digit percentages of coffee plants in the 2019/20 season to 15-25% in 2020/21, according to industry data.

Eugenio Bonilla, a 56-year-old coffee farmer from El Laurel and brother of Maria, said his production nearly halved in the 2020/21 season, mostly because of Roya.

"It's useless that coffee prices have been improving if the trees are not in good condition," he said.

Eugenio said some farmers in his hamlet had suffered eight years of losses.

Their margins are razor-thin, with around half the global coffee price going to middlemen.

When world coffee prices averaged \$1.41 per lb in 2019/20, for example, Bonilla said he and his fellow farmers received just 15 lempiras (\$0.6238) per lb of coffee that cost them around 20 lempiras (\$0.8317) to produce.

IT'S THE ONLY WAY'

Several coffee farmers in Central America spoke of frightening debt spirals.

"They start selling their things," said José Magaña, 60, a farmer from the state of Santa Ana in El Salvador. "If they have a couple of oxen, in the case of small coffee growers, they sell it. If someone is a medium-sized coffee grower, he sells a house, sells other things to be able to work the farms."

Carlos Landaverde's farm in Santa Ana was seized by the bank earlier this year. The 44-year-old said he was undeterred by the prospective perils of migrating with his family.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "It's the only way."

HEADLINE	12/08 WHO: omicron hospitalizations set to rise
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/omicron-reported-57-countries-hospitalizations-set-rise-who-2021-12-08/
GIST	<p>GENEVA, Dec 8 (Reuters) - The Omicron variant has been reported in 57 nations and the number of patients needing hospitalisation is likely to rise as it spreads, the World Health Organization said on Wednesday.</p> <p>The WHO, in its weekly epidemiological report, said more data was needed to assess the severity of disease caused by the Omicron variant and whether its mutations might reduce protection from vaccine-derived immunity.</p> <p>"Even if the severity is equal or potentially even lower than for Delta variant, it is expected that hospitalisations will increase if more people become infected and that there will be a time lag between an increase in the incidence of cases and an increase in the incidence of deaths," it said.</p> <p>On Nov. 26, the WHO declared the Omicron variant, which was first detected in southern Africa, a variant of concern. It is the fifth SARS-CoV-2 strain to carry such a designation.</p> <p>The number of reported COVID-19 cases in South Africa doubled in the week to Dec. 5 to more than 62,000 and "very large" increases in incidence have been seen in Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and Lesotho, it said.</p> <p>The spread of Omicron, coupled with enhanced testing and low vaccination rates may have played a role, it added.</p> <p>Referring to the risk of reinfection, the WHO said: "Preliminary analysis suggests that the mutations present in the Omicron variant may reduce neutralising activity of antibodies resulting in reduced protection from natural immunity."</p> <p>"There is a need for more data to assess whether the mutations present on the Omicron variant may result in reduced protection from vaccine-derived immunity and data on vaccine effectiveness, including the use of additional vaccination doses," it said.</p> <p>The Omicron variant can partially evade the protection from two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine produced by Pfizer Inc (PFE.N) and BioNTech (22UAY.DE), the research head of a laboratory at the Africa Health Research Institute in South Africa said on Tuesday, reporting the results of a small study.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Poland faces surge Covid deaths
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-ukraine-poland-warsaw-2f631e3b51446af1aef39c8bf96955e8
GIST	<p>WARSAW, Poland (AP) — As 83-year-old Hanna Zientara endured subfreezing temperatures to get a COVID-19 vaccine booster shot in Warsaw, her 30-year-old grandson was starting a Canary Islands vacation while unvaccinated and stubbornly refusing his grandmother's repeated pleas to protect himself.</p> <p>"I am worried about him, but I have no influence over him. None," Zientara said. "He has many doctor friends who aren't getting vaccinated, and he says if they aren't getting vaccinated, then he doesn't have to."</p> <p>Poland and several other countries in Central and Eastern Europe are battling their latest surges of coronavirus cases and deaths while continuing to record much lower vaccinations rates than in Western Europe.</p> <p>In Russia, more than 1,200 people with COVID-19 died every day for most of November and on several days in December, and the daily death toll remains over 1,100. Ukraine, which is recording hundreds of virus deaths a day, is emerging from its deadliest period of the pandemic.</p>

Meanwhile, the mortality rate in Poland, while lower than it was in the spring, recently has caused more than 500 deaths per day and still has not peaked. On Wednesday, the country reported 592 more virus deaths, the highest number of its current wave.

Intensive care units are full, and doctors report that more and more children require hospitalization, including some who went through COVID-19 without symptoms but then suffered strokes.

The situation has created a dilemma for Poland's government, which has urged citizens to get vaccinated but clearly worries about alienating voters who oppose vaccine mandates or any restrictions on economic life.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki received his vaccine booster publicly last week and urged others to get their shots to protect older adults at Christmas. He noted that some family gatherings during the pandemic have "ended tragically, ended with the departure of our grandfathers, grandmothers."

To promote vaccines, Health Minister Adam Niedzielski pointed out Monday that of the 1,085 people under age 44 who died with COVID-19 so far this year in Poland, only 3% were fully vaccinated. "This black statistic could be different thanks to vaccinations," he said.

With a health system already stretched to its limits, Poland's government announced Tuesday that it is requiring doctors, other medical personnel, teachers and uniformed workers like police officers, members of the military and firefighters to be vaccinated by March 1.

Critics of the right-wing government denounced the step as too little too late, while a far-right party, Confederation, slammed it as discriminating against unvaccinated Poles.

The resistance to vaccines in Eastern Europe is rooted in distrust of pharmaceutical companies and government authorities, while disinformation also appears to be playing a role.

As worried grandmother Zientara received a Pfizer vaccine booster dose on Tuesday, the Polish government reported 504 more deaths, bringing the pandemic death toll to over 86,000 in the nation of 38 million.

Sitting nearby was Andrzej Wiazecki, a 56-year-old who needed no convincing to come in for a booster shot. He said he has several friends hospitalized with COVID-19, including a previously healthy and athletic 32-year-old who is fighting for his life.

"I expect him to die, especially since there is no room for him in the intensive care unit because there are so many patients that he is lying somewhere in a corridor," he said.

"He didn't want to get vaccinated," Wiazecki said. "His siblings are also not vaccinated, and even though he is dying, they still don't want to get vaccinated."

With 54% of Poles fully vaccinated, the country has a higher coronavirus inoculation rate than some nearby countries. Ukraine's vaccination rate is 27%, and in Russia, where domestically developed vaccines like Sputnik V are on offer, it is about 41%. Bulgaria, which like Poland belongs to the European Union, has a vaccination rate of 26%, the lowest in the bloc.

The discovery of the omicron variant last month has fueled fears in Poland, where experts believe the variant is likely already circulating though no cases have been confirmed. Many critical questions about omicron remain unanswered, including whether the virus causes milder or more severe illness and how much it might evade immunity from past COVID-19 illness or vaccines.

According to Polish media reports, the variant's emergence led some holdouts to finally get their first vaccine shots, including in the southern mountain region of Podhale, where the vaccination rates are far below the national average.

But at the vaccination center in Warsaw, located in a blood donation center, there were not many first-timers. Coordinator Paula Rekawek said only one person had turned up in the center's first three hours of operation Tuesday to request an initial dose.

Warsaw restaurateur Artur Jarczynski has found a business opportunity in the high level of vaccine resistance. His popular Der Elefant was the first restaurant in Poland, and until recently the only one, to require customers to show proof of vaccination to enter.

Jarczynski said that while traveling in Western Europe, he was asked for proof of vaccination to dine and thought it was a good practice. When he first introduced the requirement at Der Elefant, anti-vaxxers demonstrating in front of parliament brought their protest to his restaurant and he got police protection. Jarczynski says he also was bombarded by hateful phone calls for a couple of days.

Yet many patrons appreciate the rare public space where they can feel safe while enjoying a meal, such as the mussel soup, steaks and other fare served for lunch on Tuesday. One diner, Ryszard Kowalski, said he liked knowing everyone around him was vaccinated but the restaurant's policy was proof "there is no need for government orders" to create safe environments.

But Jarczynski has not yet dared to impose the vaccine requirement in several other Warsaw restaurants he owns.

He described Der Elefant as "an island in a country of almost 40 million people, which on the one hand makes us happy, but also sad that we are just such a tiny island."

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HEADLINE	12/08 Pfizer: 3 shots necessary against omicron
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/08/health/pfizer-omicron-vaccine-data/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Preliminary lab studies show two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine may not provide sufficient protection against the Omicron coronavirus variant, but three doses are able to neutralize it, the companies said in a news release on Wednesday.</p> <p>Samples from people who had two doses of the Covid-19 vaccine saw, on average, a more than 25-fold reduction in neutralization ability against the Omicron variant than the earlier virus, "indicating that two doses of BNT162b2 may not be sufficient to protect against infection with the Omicron variant," the companies said.</p> <p>The companies said two doses may still provide protection against severe disease.</p> <p>"Although two doses of the vaccine may still offer protection against severe disease caused by the Omicron strain, it's clear from these preliminary data that protection is improved with a third dose of our vaccine," Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla said in a statement. "Ensuring as many people as possible are fully vaccinated with the first two dose series and a booster remains the best course of action to prevent the spread of COVID-19."</p> <p>The initial lab studies used serum from blood from individuals who received two or three doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine. The sera was collected from subjects three weeks after their second dose, or one month after a third dose.</p> <p>Pfizer and BioNTech are continuing to develop a variant-specific vaccine for Omicron and say it will be available by March, if it's needed.</p>

	<p>The data released Wednesday has not been peer-reviewed or published.</p> <p>Researchers in South Africa on Tuesday released a preprint study that showed the Omicron coronavirus variant partly escapes the protection offered by the Pfizer vaccine. The study showed people who have been previously infected and then vaccinated are likely to be well protected, and Alex Sigal of the Africa Health Research Institute in Durban, who led the study team, told CNN that boosters are also likely to protect people.</p> <p>"My impression is if you get a booster you are protected, especially against severe disease," Sigal said.</p> <p>Since reports of the Omicron variant emerged in late November, US health officials have urged people to get vaccinated and boosted. Last week, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began recommending all adults get a Covid-19 vaccine booster.</p> <p>Adults who have had the Pfizer or Moderna Covid-19 vaccines are eligible to get a booster six months after their second shot. Those who got the Johnson & Johnson one-shot vaccine are eligible for a booster of any authorized vaccine two months after their first dose.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Govt. forecast: gas prices to tumble soon
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/08/business/gas-price-forecast/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)Prices at the pump have finally started to creep lower, and that trend should significantly accelerate in the coming months, according to new government forecasts.</p> <p>The US Energy Information Administration said Tuesday the national average for regular gasoline will probably drop to \$3.01 a gallon in January. For 2022, gas prices are expected to average \$2.88.</p> <p>That call is based on projections by the EIA for global oil production to increase more quickly than demand next year — especially given the emergence of the Omicron variant. This would be a reversal of the past 18 months, when output has been slow to meet surging demand as the world reopens from Covid-19.</p> <p>The EIA, which is an arm of the Energy Department, cited risks that the new variant dents global consumption of energy and expectations for stronger supply from OPEC+, US shale oil companies and other major producers.</p> <p>The agency also pointed to the impact from the US-led intervention in energy markets, highlighted by the biggest-ever release of barrels from America's Strategic Petroleum Reserve.</p> <p>Brent oil, the main driver of prices at the pump, is expected to average \$70 a barrel in 2020. That's down from the average of \$84 in October and \$81 in November.</p> <p>In November, gasoline prices averaged \$3.39 nationally — the highest level since September 2014, the EIA said. But the agency expects that average to drop to \$3.13 a gallon in December and continue falling next year.</p> <p>Citing new travel restrictions imposed in the wake of the emergence of Omicron, the EIA downgraded its forecast for oil consumption for both the fourth quarter of this year and the first quarter of next.</p> <p>"The potential effects of the spread of this variant are uncertain, which introduces downside risks to the global oil consumption forecast, particularly for jet fuel," the EIA said.</p> <p>Oil prices crashed after Thanksgiving as investors feared Omicron would derail booming demand for energy.</p> <p>However, crude has since rebounded amid anecdotal evidence of milder symptoms from Omicron.</p>

	<p>The EIA acknowledged the vast amount of uncertainty around the health crisis.</p> <p>"This is a very complicated environment for the entire energy sector," Steve Nalley, acting administrator of the EIA, said in a statement. "Our forecasts for petroleum and other energy prices, consumption, and production could change significantly as we learn more about how responses to the Omicron variant could affect oil demand and the broader economy."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Michigan becomes Covid hotspot
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/07/health/michigan-covid-cases-hospitalizations/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Michigan continues to struggle amid the pandemic, setting a record this week for Covid-19 hospitalizations and leading the nation in per capita case rates, new data reveal.</p> <p>The state also recently reported its highest seven-day average of new daily cases, at 10,014, on December 3. The average dipped on Monday to 8,585 a day -- still more than double where it was at the end of October, according to Johns Hopkins University data.</p> <p>Last month, the state health department said the federal government was sending doctors, nurses and others to support certain hospitals.</p> <p>As of Monday, about 55% of Michigan's population was fully vaccinated, tying it for 26th among the 50 states for that metric and below the US average of 60%, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Michigan has reported more new cases per capita over the last week than any other state, with Minnesota and Rhode Island not far behind, according to JHU data. The daily case rate is more than double the US case rate.</p> <p>The number of Covid-19 patients in Michigan hospitals is 4,638 currently hospitalized on Monday, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services. That tops the previous high set in November 2020.</p> <p>In November, after Gov. Gretchen Whitmer asked for help, the federal government agreed to "send two medical teams to local hospitals to relieve doctors and nurses as they treat Covid-19 and other patients," Michigan's health department said.</p> <p>The 44 medical personnel -- including doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists -- were being split between Dearborn's Beaumont Hospital outside Detroit, and the Spectrum Health system in Grand Rapids, the state health department said.</p> <p>Though Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations in the United States dropped off at the tail end of a summer surge, they've risen over the past few weeks.</p> <p>Michigan -- along with some other states that weren't initially hit as hard as the South by the summer surge -- has been especially under pressure.</p> <p>The state previously reported its highest seven-day average of new daily cases for the pandemic, at 8,793 on November 19.</p> <p>The new Omicron variant has raised new concerns, but the Delta variant remains highly dominant in the US -- and in Michigan. In the country, more than 99.9% of cases identified are the highly transmissible Delta variant.</p>

	<p>Although more than a dozen US states have identified cases of the Omicron variant, Michigan has not yet identified any.</p> <p>"Before we get to Omicron and what we know and what we don't know, Delta is still the most significant player by far that we have in the US and we're not in a terribly good place right now," Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, said Tuesday on CNN.</p> <p>"Following Thanksgiving, we're seeing cases going up again now over 100,000 new cases every day, and we didn't want to be there, and hospitalizations also going up, and, sadly, deaths now in excess of 1,000 every day, the vast majority of those being unvaccinated people," Collins said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Sawant behind in early recall results
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/local/politics/article/kshama-sawant-appears-to-have-been-recalled-16683611.php
GIST	<p>In what could be a massive blow to Seattle's progressive faction, Kshama Sawant — one of the city's most prominent and polarizing elected officials — is losing in an election that would oust her from her Position 3 seat on the Seattle City Council.</p> <p>Early results from Tuesday's special election show Sawant behind, with 53% of District 3 voters choosing to recall Sawant, and 47% voting to retain her.</p> <p>There are roughly 2,600 ballots left to count. Sawant would need to secure more than 75% of the remaining ballots over the coming days in order to close the gap. That is a steep hill, but progressive voters are known for voting later, which means the bulk of the remaining votes could be in Sawant's favor.</p> <p>Another batch of results will be released Wednesday, and King County election officials expect to be done counting ballots by Friday.</p> <p>If Sawant is recalled, it would be yet another frustration for Seattle progressives, who saw their preferred candidates lose to more moderate ones in several key races during last month's general election. It would also illustrate that District 3 voters seemingly care more about her conduct in office than they do her stances on policy.</p> <p>Sawant faced a recall on three charges that were each listed on the ballot voters received. First, that she used city resources to support a proposed ballot initiative. Second, that she violated state health orders by letting Black Lives Matter protestors into a locked City Hall last summer. And third, that she led a march to Mayor Jenny Durkan's house, the address of which is protected under state confidentiality laws because of her work as a federal prosecutor.</p> <p>Sawant admitted to the first charge, saying it was an accident. As to the second and third charges, Sawant has said she didn't violate a specific state health order when she let protestors into City Hall and that she had no part in organizing the march to Durkan's house.</p> <p>The state Supreme Court, which allowed the recall to go forward, did not rule on the veracity of the charges. But whether Sawant violated a state health order or led protestors to Durkan's house no longer matters — voters are letting her know they disapprove of her actions at the ballot box.</p> <p>If recalled, Sawant would be removed from office later this month. The Seattle City Council would then have 20 days to appoint a replacement to fill the seat. A special election for the post would be held in November of next year. Sawant would be eligible to run for this same seat or another office.</p> <p>Sawant was outraged by her opponents, but not by much. As of Monday — the last day data was available — Recall Sawant and A Better Seattle, two groups fighting to oust Sawant, had raised \$998,459 in contributions. The Kshama Solidarity Campaign, which fought the recall, had raised \$984,318.</p>

Data from Seattle's Ethics and Elections Commission shows that most of the contributions made to the recall effort came from Seattle residents that don't live in District 3, while most of the contributions made to the Kshama Solidarity Campaign came from donors outside of the city.

Only District 3 residents could vote in the election. The district includes Capitol Hill, the Central District, First Hill, Madison Park, Little Saigon International District, Madrona, Mount Baker, North Beacon Hill and South Lake Union.

In the months leading up the recall, Sawant claimed that the recall organizers wanted the vote to take place in a special election, where turnout is often dreadfully low. The Kshama Solidarity Campaign even helped gather signatures to recall Sawant in the hopes the vote ended up on last month's general election ballot.

There is no historical precedent for a Seattle recall election in December in an off year, but King County elections officials estimated roughly 50% turnout. They weren't far off. Of the 77,579 registered voters in the district, 34,753 returned a ballot. That amounts to just under 45% turnout.

Sawant, a socialist, has been a fierce advocate for the city's renters and unsheltered population.

She spearheaded efforts to raise the city's minimum wage to \$15 and was instrumental in implementing a payroll tax on high-salary earners at local corporations. She also led the charge to ban most wintertime and school-year evictions in Seattle, and helped mandate relocation assistance to those who move after substantial rent increases.

But those leading the recall effort say Sawant's actions over the last year demonstrate that she's not fit to hold public office, and the District 3 voters that cast ballots in this election seem so far to agree.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Snohomish Co. settles in tribal death
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/family-of-tulalip-man-who-told-deputies-i-cant-breathe-during-fatal-struggle-will-get-1-75-million-in-snohomish-county-settlement/
GIST	<p>Snohomish County has agreed to pay \$1.75 million to the widow of a Tulalip tribal member who died while struggling with police in 2015, settling a lawsuit over allegations that officers used excessive force on Cecil Lacy Jr. when they held him down, even as he told them he couldn't breathe.</p> <p>The settlement resolves a suit that at one point was summarily dismissed by a state judge, only to be unanimously reinstated by the Washington Court of Appeals last year.</p> <p>The case had called into question the independence of an investigation into Lacy's death conducted by the Snohomish County Multiple Agency Response Team and alleged the detectives, the county medical examiner and prosecutors conspired with a union-appointed attorney to leave Lacy's last words — "I can't breathe" — out of investigative documents.</p> <p>The reliability of investigations of officer-involved deaths by other police officers has long been subject to criticism, but has come under particular scrutiny since the May 25, 2020, death of George Floyd, who died when a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes. A month earlier, a Tacoma man, Manny Ellis, died while restrained by police there. In both cases, they told officers they couldn't breathe before lapsing into unconsciousness.</p> <p>Derek Chauvin, the officer in the Floyd case, was convicted of murder. Three Tacoma officers have been charged in connection with Ellis' death.</p> <p>The Lacy family's Seattle attorney, Gabe Galanda, sent a letter to Gov. Jay Inslee requesting an independent investigation into the incident. Inslee did not request another investigation at that time but has since said he will encourage a review of the deaths of Lacy and of Stonechild Chiefstick — who was shot and killed by a Poulsbo police officer in 2019 — by an agency established in the last legislative session to investigate and review all deaths at the hands of law enforcement.</p>

“This is a big victory for our family,” Lacy’s widow, Stacy, said Tuesday. “We have been fighting for six years, in and out of court, to obtain justice. It’s good to know that Cecil is not forgotten and that his life matters.”

She and Cecil had three children and each had a child from a previous marriage, Sara Lacy said. Her husband had worked as a commercial fisher and drove a school bus for the Tulalip Tribal youth services.

“He was a natural-born comedian,” she said.

Sara Lacy is a member of the Washington Coalition for Police Accountability and lobbied at the Washington Legislature last year to pass a series of police reform measures including House Bill 1267, which established the agency in the governor’s office that will review police-related deaths.

Last year, a three-judge panel in the Court of Appeals Division I [unanimously concluded](#) that Sara Lacy could pursue a civil battery claim against the Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office and Deputy Tyler Pendergrass, who confronted the 46-year-old Cecil Lacy the night of Sept. 18, 2015, as he was walking along Marine Drive on the Tulalip Indian Reservation. Lacy, a tribal member, appeared intoxicated or under the influence of drugs, and Pendergrass called for backup with the intent of taking Lacy home or to the hospital, according to reports and court documents.

Lacy was never placed under arrest, according to documents.

Aided by officers from the Tulalip tribal police, Pendergrass said he tried to calm Lacy, and eventually one officer offered Lacy a ride home. They agreed to handcuff Lacy with his hands in front — he was not under arrest — but after he got into the car, he became agitated and fled. Pendergrass and two other officers, including a sergeant from the tribal police, wrestled him to the ground and pinned him facedown, with Pendergrass across his back. At some point, Lacy quit struggling; however, the officers remained on top of him until additional officers arrived.

Instead, Lacy died lying on his stomach in a ditch on the side of the road, three officers pinning him down — Pendergrass across his back — as Lacy gasped for air and then went still.

Other officers at the scene acknowledged to detectives Lacy said words to the effect of “I’m freaking out ... I can’t breathe” just before he died, according to reports and information. However, those final words were left out of the SMART report.

Documents uncovered during the lawsuit also indicated that investigators for the SMART task force lobbied the county medical examiner to find Lacy’s death accidental. However, an independent pathologist hired by Lacy’s family concluded he died from asphyxiation.

The trial was set to begin Monday.

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HEADLINE	12/07 New King Co. inquest process delayed
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/new-king-county-inquest-process-delayed-amid-concerns-over-integrity-transparency/
GIST	<p>The first coroner’s inquest into a deadly shooting by police in King County under a new, greatly expanded process has stalled amid concerns by all involved — the officers, the families of those killed and city officials — over the transparency and integrity of the proceedings.</p> <p>The inquest into the 2017 killing by Seattle police officers of 19-year-old Damarius Butts — the first under a new system upheld this summer by the Washington Supreme Court — was scheduled to begin Dec. 6 and run for 11 days. But it has been postponed until the new year.</p>

The King County charter requires that a coroner's inquest be held to look into the facts and circumstances surrounding any death involving law enforcement.

The Butts inquest has been postponed until Jan. 24 — and perhaps beyond — after the involved parties, in a rare move, came together to file a joint motion that expressed “serious and legitimate” apprehensions over rushed deadlines, access to witnesses and unwieldy orders issued by the inquest administrator.

Going further, Ghazal Sharifi, the section director for government affairs in the Seattle city attorney's office, wrote in a Nov. 23 email to the parties — a copy of which was obtained by The Seattle Times — in which she expressed “deep disappointment in the purported integrity of this Inquest process.”

“The Executive Order identifies the purpose of the inquest as a ‘full, fair and transparent review,’ ” of the deaths of individuals at the hands of law enforcement in King County, as required by the King County charter.

“However, for the last several weeks, the inquest program has jammed the parties with unreasonable deadlines, last minute requests, lengthy interviews of witnesses that should have been better streamlined and shifting and issuance rulings without any transparent justification for the same, without explanation to the parties of the basis for such a decision,” Sharifi wrote.

In a motion submitted on Nov. 23 to inquest administrator Michael Spearman, a retired King County Superior Court judge, attorneys for the involved police officers, the Butts family and the city jointly protested a string of unresolved or problematic issues that could muddle the process, including a cumbersome list of 131 questions the inquest jurors will be expected to answer in the verdict form.

“The nature and large number of proposed interrogatories represents a stark departure from previous inquests,” the motion says. “The sheer number of interrogatories raises serious concerns about the time it will require an inquest panel to evaluate and answer the interrogatories, and how that will impact everyone's ability to complete” the process in the allotted time.

The parties had asked that the inquest be postponed until March, and have said they may renew that request if the issues aren't resolved.

Asked by a reporter about her email, Sharifi responded via email: “Please note that despite the general frustrations, our attorneys were working diligently actively preparing to move forward as requested by the inquest program.”

The delay is a hitch in a new and significantly expanded inquest process sought by King County Executive Dow Constantine in response to complaints by families whose loved ones were killed by police and criticism that the process had over the years been tilted in favor of law enforcement.

King County is unique in Washington in that its charter requires an inquest jury review all deaths caused by police. Most other Washington counties rely on death investigations conducted by a coroner or a medical examiner.

Currently, there have been 52 law enforcement related deaths in King County since 2017 eligible for inquest, according to the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. Investigations into 32 of those have been completed and they have been reviewed and referred by the prosecutor's office to Constantine's office for inquest.

Butts was the first, and the others will be handled in chronological order, a process that could add years of uncertainty to the resolution of killings where families and police officers have already been waiting years for answers or resolution.

Except in rare cases, King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg has said he will not finalize his decision on whether to criminally charge a police officer for a death without an inquest first being held.

Constantine formed a panel of experts and sought public input, and in 2018 published a report proposing sweeping changes in the system. A number of county law enforcement agencies including Renton, Auburn, Kent and Federal Way police and the King County Sheriff's Office opposed the changes, arguing the changes strayed from the inquest's fact-finding mission, and challenged them in court. Seattle, the state's largest police department, initially had joined the group, but withdrew its opposition.

In August 2020, King County Superior Court Judge Julie Spector found Constantine had overstepped his authority, and struck down most of the revisions.

However, in July the Washington Supreme Court overturned Spector and unanimously reinstated the expanded process. The Butts inquest was to be the first case under the new system, and the attorneys involved want to get it right since it could set a precedent for future inquest juries.

"We are trying hard to make it a process that makes sense, both for this case and going forward," said Seattle attorney Ted Buck, who is one of the lawyers representing the police officers who shot and killed Butts while responding to an armed robbery call downtown on April 20, 2017.

Three officers were shot during a foot chase and confrontation with Butts that ended at a Federal Building loading dock on First Avenue. One officer was seriously injured.

"All of the parties have taken it as a very serious responsibility as the vanguard case," Buck said. "We need to clarify the process."

Attorneys for the Butts family declined to comment.

Critics, including the families of those who died in several high-profile police killings, have complained for years that the process has wandered far from its original purpose, been blunted as an investigative tool, and tilted hard in favor of law enforcement.

Constantine stopped inquests in 2017 after he determined the inequities were legitimate and too glaring to ignore.

Inquest changes initiated by Constantine and upheld by the Supreme Court include the appointment of an attorney to represent the families. The new process takes the inquest system out of the judicial arena, with administrators hearing the evidence and their attorney presenting it to the jury.

The process will include for the first time a review of a department's policies over use of force and will, for the first time in more than 40 years, include questions about whether the death involved criminality. Officers will be required to testify, something they haven't always done in the past.

The changes, however, have greatly complicated the process and will almost certainly mean inquests will last longer and be more expensive for cities and the county. Past inquests have rarely lasted a week and usually less. Inquest panels were generally asked a handful of questions, usually revolving around factual issues and whether an officer feared for their life or the lives of others when they used deadly force.

Among the key concerns raised by the parties in their motion for the continuance were conflicting schedules of the parties and witnesses, including the fact that the officers involved were being asked to set aside two weeks of their time when their individual testimony would last just two or three days; a list of proposed exhibits provided by the inquest attorney in a form that made it "incredibly difficult" for the parties to raise objections; and confusion over which Seattle Police Department policies would be subject to scrutiny by the inquest jury. Key witnesses remained to be interviewed and schedules clashed, the motion pointed out.

Moreover, as it stands now, a four- or six-member coroner's jury empaneled to hear the Butts case would hear nearly two weeks of testimony and be asked to answer, individually, 131 questions about such things as whether each officer followed policy or whether their actions involved a possible violation of the law.

In a statement, Constantine recognized that "the years lost to court cases have delayed justice and accountability for many" and said he is "eager to have the cases resume as soon as they feasibly can.

"It's not surprising that aligning schedules and timelines has taken some effort, but [I'm] confident that all parties are working together to get the first hearing in motion soon," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/07 CDC report: increase in autism
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/07/cdc-autism-diagnosis-rate-children/
GIST	<p>The rate of 8-year-olds in the United States diagnosed with autism rose in 2018, to about 1 in 44, according to data tracked by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — an increase attributed to better access to early interventions that result in more comprehensive identification of the condition.</p> <p>A March 2020 report from the CDC estimated that 1 in 54 8-year-olds had received an autism diagnosis. Between the release of that report and the findings presented this month, the prevalence of autism increased from about 1.9 percent to 2.3 percent of children in that age group.</p> <p>"The substantial progress in early identification is good news because the earlier that children are identified with autism, the sooner they can be connected to services and support," Karen Remley, director of CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, said in a statement.</p> <p>"Accessing these services at younger ages can help children do better in school and have a better quality of life."</p> <p>The federal agency collects data from 11 communities in Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Tennessee, Utah and Wisconsin. Though those communities are not a representative sample of the U.S. population, researchers have tracked changes in autism prevalence in those areas since 2000 to understand the developmental condition over time.</p> <p>The latest report found that autism rates varied greatly throughout the United States. California had the highest incidence rate, with 1 in 26 8-year-olds receiving a diagnosis. Missouri had the lowest rate, with 1 in 60 children in that age group assessed with the condition. The report said those differences may reflect how communities identify children with autism, because some regions have more services for children with autism and their families.</p> <p>Andy Shih, interim chief science officer at the advocacy group Autism Speaks, agreed that regional differences may be tied to more robust services in some of the 11 locations studied by the CDC, which tend to draw families seeking treatment options for their children.</p> <p>"We often hear about parents moving to a state where it's easier for them to access services and regular support," Shih said.</p> <p>Some experts caution that the way the CDC collects data could skew the numbers and make it seem like autism is more common than it is. Developmental psychologist Bryna Siegel warned that the CDC is likely overcounting autism cases in many places.</p> <p>In some states, an autism diagnosis is often a path to affordable services for a child with special needs. That dynamic can create an ethical dilemma for doctors who want to help families find services to improve a child's quality of life.</p>

“If a child gets a diagnosis of a language disorder, maybe he’ll get group speech therapy once a week when he goes to Head Start, but if you say that he has autism, he might get home-based one-to-one applied behavior analysis services for 25 hours a week,” said Siegel, executive director of the Autism Center of Northern California, an assessment clinic that provides services to children with autism. “And, truthfully, any kid is going to do better with 25 hours a week of one-to-one service than with a 20-minute group speech therapy session each week.”

Because doctors want to connect patients with the best services available, they may be inclined to justify an autism diagnosis so that children can get access to the services that come with it.

“And so clinicians are put in a terrible bind to use the diagnosis of autism,” Siegel said.

A CDC epidemiologist said the agency’s data reflects practices and services.

“There is not a universal and objective ‘gold standard’ diagnostic procedure; there is variability in diagnostic practices and policies, and experts (and diagnostic instruments) can disagree on their conclusions,” Matt Maenner, an epidemiologist for the CDC’s National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, said in an email. “The [Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring] Network data allow people to see what is happening in their communities, including how and when children are identified as having autism.”

Maenner said issues with improper diagnoses should be addressed by providers, and would not affect how the agency collects data.

“If the data raise questions about how communities are identifying children with autism, it would seem better to work to improve practices rather than adjust the surveillance data to mask these issues,” Maenner added.

Still, the CDC’s data gives some insight into who is being diagnosed with autism and where.

Boys were four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls — a trend that has held up since the CDC began collecting data on the condition in 2000. The researchers found few differences in prevalence based on race, with similar rates among 8-year-olds in Black, White, and Asian or Pacific Islander communities. Fewer Hispanic children were diagnosed with autism compared with other groups, according to the report. The data showed that about one-third of the children diagnosed with autism also had an intellectual disability.

Shih said the CDC’s study suggests that efforts to expand early intervention have been succeeding, but some states could be doing more to reach children in underserved and lower-income communities.

“It’s really imperative for us trying to identify children as early as possible, to get them into support and services,” he added.

In additional findings regarding children who turned 4 years old in 2018 in those same 11 communities, new patterns in diagnosis emerged, according to the CDC. There were more diagnoses among Black, Hispanic, and Asian or Pacific Islander children than among White children in that cohort. Lower-income neighborhoods also had higher prevalence rates, the agency said.

Those children who were born in 2014 were 50 percent more likely to have received a diagnosis by their fourth birthday, compared with children who were born in 2010. The researchers said that data reflected improved access to early intervention, which can help children with autism thrive later in life.

“We’re doing a better job for the younger kids,” Shih said.

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SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/escooters-accidents-europe/#intcid=wired-verso-hp-trending_5dce6fa2-79c5-4203-a6c9-ab943087dda8_popular4-1
GIST	<p>THE SUMMER OF 2020 was something of a heyday—and a Wild West—for e-scooters in Scandinavia. Rental companies had been swarming to the region’s cities—Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen among them—believing they would be easy e-scooter converts thanks to heavily ingrained cycling cultures and their strong interest in sustainability. As city officials balked at how to impose order on this new and untamed industry, the e-scooters were arriving by the thousands, finding willing riders everywhere.</p> <p>The free-floating model—where e-scooters could be left or picked up anywhere—prompted complaints about the mess they made and the dangers they posed. Videos of e-scooter crashes crystalized anger on social media. There were reports of casualty wards filling up with drunk riders. For people who were visually impaired, their cities were becoming a daunting obstacle course. “There were a lot of accidents,” says Terje André Olsen, lead of the Norwegian Association of the Blind, an advocacy group with over 8,000 members, speaking from Oslo. “Many elderly people didn’t dare to go out, and people used taxis more often to get to work because it was so complicated to walk on the payments.” That summer, he adds, he counted around 40 e-scooters lying across the pavements during one 35 minute walk to work.</p> <p>The e-scooter companies, however, were focused on high demand. “The first thing that we noticed [after arriving in the region in 2018] is that services were being used a lot more than in some other parts of Europe,” says Alan Clarke, UK and Nordic policy director at US-based e-scooter startup Lime, adding that the company’s e-scooters in the region were averaging five to six rides each per day. In response to those numbers, companies started scaling up their services. “We would have typically launched with a few hundred scooters, and I think by the peak in Copenhagen [in 2020], we had a few thousand,” says Clarke. The pandemic energized the industry further, with companies selling their services to both riders and investors as a clean, green way to travel around cities without sharing the same stale air as fellow passengers on buses and trains. By summer 2021, Oslo’s Urban Environment Agency, the government department responsible for the city’s public spaces, reported there were 30,000 e-scooters in the Norwegian capital, or 200 scooters per 10,000 residents, meaning it had more e-scooters per capita than any other city in the world. The numbers weren’t quite so high in other parts of Scandinavia, but the agency estimated that in Stockholm there were 125 e-scooters per 10,000 residents—still far higher than elsewhere in Europe: Berlin, Paris, and Rome all lingered below 50.</p> <p>As Scandinavia’s e-scooter population kept rising, the mood toward the companies bringing them soured. “It’s a jungle. It’s a mess,” says Daniel Helldén, vice mayor for transport in Stockholm, where the number of e-scooters almost tripled from 2019 to 2021, jumping from 8,500 to 23,000. “The biggest problem is the parking. They are parked on the sidewalks in a way that makes it impossible for people to get through. If you are disabled in some way, it’s a huge problem.”</p> <p>A strict regulatory crackdown has quickly followed the growing irritation. In the past year, Nordic countries have been trying to wrestle their capitals back from this new industry and unceremoniously throwing e-scooter companies out of their cities. The marginal cost and the economics of operating large fleets of e-scooters means rental companies lost sight of their long-term relationships with the cities they were operating in, says David Mothander, Bolt’s head of public policy in the Nordics. “Companies might be tempted to be short-sighted and try to flood the streets and gain advantages. But inevitably, the cities will react as we’ve seen in Oslo or Stockholm or Copenhagen. In a way, we have ourselves to blame for this.”</p> <p>Copenhagen lost patience quicker than most. In October 2020, the city’s mayor of technology and the environment, Ninna Hedeager Olsen, decided to end what she described to DR as “unregulated chaos” by banning all 13 of the free-floating rental companies operating in the city. “What happened was three operators flooded the streets with these scooters ... and the city just got fed up and threw them out,” says Mothander of Bolt. For a year, the free-floating model remained banished completely, with Copenhagen’s residents and visitors able to hire e-scooters only from companies with physical shops. But in October 2021, the city offered an olive branch, allowing a limited number of companies back under new, far tougher terms. “We have a restricted number of e-scooters, and also with pretty harsh rules of where we can operate and cannot operate,” says Mothander.</p>

Bolt was not the only company to express consternation with Copenhagen's new rules. "Although we're happy to offer our scooters in the city again, we are disappointed with some elements of the tender, such as the inability to park in the city center where we know the majority of Copenhageners and visitors to the city would love to find e-scooters," Eric André, Voi's general manager for Sweden and Denmark, said in a statement on Voi's website. Their complaints fell on unsympathetic ears, however, and by the summer of 2021, Denmark's strict stance was being replicated by its neighbors just as Nordic capitals began reporting their first e-scooter deaths. In July 2021, police confirmed that a [68-year-old man had died](#) from injuries sustained in an electric scooter accident in Oslo. In September 2021, an 80-year-old cyclist in Sweden [died](#) after crashing into an e-scooter parked across a cycle route. The same month, a hospital in Helsinki told *Euronews* that it had been forced to [hire more staff to cope](#) with the extra burden of scooter-related injuries.

In July 2021, it was Oslo's turn to launch a crackdown. But instead of driving providers out, the city capped the number of e-scooters allowed at 8,000 and divided that number between each of the 12 operators that had qualified for a license. Limiting rental companies to only 667 e-scooters each, however, has not been a popular solution. "The problem is not fixed," says Olsen of the Norwegian Association of the Blind. "We have to create a solution for the parking problem, and we have to make it illegal to use them on the pavement." E-scooter companies aren't thrilled either. "No one really has a fleet size that's large enough to be able to make long-term investment," Lime's Clarke says, calling the measure "imperfect."

City officials agree with some of that criticism and say residents have also complained about having to download so many different e-scooter apps. There are plans to reduce the number of licensed operators to two or three when the legislation runs out in April 2022, according to Rune Gjør, Oslo's mobility director. But even if the current system is imperfect, there is evidence it has made the city safer. When the new rules came into effect on September 10, the numbers of reports about e-scooter injuries in the city's casualty wards dropped dramatically, Gjør says. Between August and September the number of people with e-scooter injuries in Oslo's Emergency Ward was halved, falling from 301 to 143.

The crackdown has not been limited to Scandinavia. In November 2021, Paris introduced new rules demanding rented e-scooter speeds be [capped at 6 mph](#) in 700 areas of the city, after a pedestrian was hit and killed by an e-scooter in June. Brussels has also been debating stricter e-scooter rules and is expected to vote [in early 2022](#) on special parking areas, speed limits, and fines for scooters cluttering the street after regular reports of [accidents across Belgium](#). After at least six e-scooter deaths in the UK capital, London's Royal Parks charity, which is in charge of some of the city's largest green spaces, announced in August a ban on e-scooters due to safety concerns.

Back in the Nordics, e-scooter companies have yet to decide on a coordinated approach toward the new rules sweeping the region. When Helsinki introduced a ban on e-scooters between midnight and 5 am in September 2021, Voi's senior operations manager in Finland, Reetta Alastalo, told *Yle News* the company preferred the idea of "a long-term awareness-raising campaign." Some have advocated instead for being allowed to use in-app nudges and disincentives to encourage different behavior. Helsinki was the first place Lime rolled out tests designed to identify whether a rider is drunk. But the company says it supports some regulation, because that offers stability; their scooters would be less likely to get thrown out of a city at short notice. "It allows us to make investments into cities. It allows us to hire staff on longer-term contracts," says Clarke.

Other companies have been more aggressive in attempts to maintain their business. When Oslo first announced its rule changes, Tier, Voi, and Ryde tried—and failed—to block the decision in court. Only Ryde is still pursuing the case, according to Gjør.

Despite the ongoing drama, there is a sense in Scandinavian capitals that e-scooters are something city officials want to encourage—just in a more controlled environment. In Stockholm, where councillors are in the process of cutting the number of e-scooter rental companies allowed in the city from eight to three; Helldén claims all this effort shows that the city is keen to keep scooters as part of the transport mix.

	“Otherwise we would have tried to abandon them,” the transport official says. “They are still a really smart type of transport. We know that [in Stockholm] there are 60,000 journeys a day. That's a lot.”
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HEADLINE	12/08 Locals: Myanmar junta in horrific massacre
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3n44x/myanmar-military-massacre
GIST	<p>The charred remains of 11 bodies have been found in rural Myanmar, with teenagers and a disabled man said to be among the victims.</p> <p>Video emerged on Tuesday showing the blackened, stiffened corpses stacked in a still-smoking pile, with Done Taw village locals saying they were massacred by soldiers from Myanmar's military junta.</p> <p>News outlet Myanmar Now reported locals as saying that some of the victims' hands were tied when their bodies were found. Cries for help were reportedly heard during the fire, leading some to believe that they were burned alive.</p> <p>“They beat them to the brink of death and burned them alive before they died. Some of them are not even 18,” said a leader of the local People's Defense Force (PDF), a self-organising guerilla group that has sprung up in communities across the country to resist the junta.</p> <p>Myanmar has been rocked by unrelenting civil unrest as anti-junta groups have fought back against the country's military, which toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's government in a coup on Feb. 1.</p> <p>It remains unclear if there were any eyewitnesses to the killings, and the exact circumstances surrounding the deaths are yet to be verified. But one Done Taw resident told <i>Myanmar Now</i> that the 11 victims “were running through the farm and got shot and were taken to the hut where they were burned.” Another villager organising the men's funerals said the soldiers “found them, beat them up and burned them.”</p> <p>Local news outlet <i>Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)</i> said the men were tied up and shot in the head, with those who survived the shooting heard wailing as the hut was set on fire and they were burned alive.</p> <p>The victims included a man with paraplegia and five people under 18, including a 14-year-old, according to a list compiled by the local PDF. <i>Myanmar Now</i> reported the local PDF as saying all the men were members of the group, but none were armed when they were captured by soldiers.</p> <p><i>DVB</i>, however, reported that all the men were civilians, with Radio Free Asia quoting local villagers as saying the men were farm workers.</p> <p>“He didn't do anything, [he was] just a naive boy although he was over 20 years old. Only once or twice was he a village nightwatchman, he didn't join a PDF or other armed group,” a woman told <i>DVB</i>, referring to her son who was killed.</p> <p>Fighting had broken out near the village on Tuesday morning when PDF forces detonated explosives as a military convoy was passing through the area. Following the explosions, soldiers entered the nearest village, which happened to be Done Taw, and opened fire.</p> <p>The military has not publicly responded to the killings and could not be reached for comment.</p> <p>Myanmar's military is infamous for its ultra-violent acts and is regularly implicated in atrocities committed against civilians. In 2018, Reuters journalists reported that 10 unarmed Rohingya men were shot, hacked to death and then buried in a mass grave in what has come to be known as the Inn Din massacre.</p>

	On Sunday, disturbing video footage captured a military vehicle plowing into peaceful protesters marching in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city. The attack occurred ahead of Aung San Suu Kyi's politically motivated trial on Monday, where she was sentenced to four years in prison—later reduced to two—for incitement.
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HEADLINE	12/07 Omicron is here but delta kills 1,100 daily
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjbk8p/omicron-is-coming-but-delta-is-still-killing-1000-people-a-day
GIST	<p>The highly transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19 has now been detected in nearly 20 states—but the biggest coronavirus-related problem in the U.S. is still the same variant that wreaked havoc this past summer.</p> <p>The U.S. is adding more than 1,100 deaths to its COVID death toll every day, and on Monday the CDC confirmed nearly 200,000 new cases of COVID-19, according to the agency's most recent data. Cases are up 30 percent over the past two weeks, nearly 60,000 people are currently hospitalized, and hospitals in some parts of the highly vaccinated Northeast are running at or over capacity.</p> <p>The Omicron variant, which was discovered by South African doctors and researchers in late November and led to the U.S. instituting a travel ban against several African nations, has now been found in at least 19 U.S. states. Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the top official in Texas' most populous county, said Monday that a fully vaccinated woman in her 40s with no recent travel history tested positive for the new variant.</p> <p>The variant was also detected in eight of Houston's 39 wastewater treatment plants from samples taken in late November, indicating the variant was likely in the U.S. before its discovery by South African researchers.</p> <p>Cases in South Africa, where just over a quarter of the population is fully vaccinated, have grown exponentially over the past few weeks, and the number of confirmed cases has surged in the U.K. and Denmark, two of the world leaders in genome sequencing and countries where more than 70 percent of the populations are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>All of this has experts worried that the new variant could evade immune defenses from vaccines and prior infections more easily than previous variants have, potentially creating a huge setback for efforts to end the pandemic. But so far, early evidence has indicated that the new variant may either be less virulent than Delta and other strains of the virus, or respond well to previous immunity.</p> <p>Doctors at Steve Biko Tshwane District and Hospital Complex in Pretoria, South Africa, said in a report this weekend that so far they've seen far fewer people in the intensive care for COVID than at the same stage of the Delta wave, and fewer patients required oxygen.</p> <p>In fact, out of the nine people with COVID pneumonia at the hospital as of Dec. 2, only one fully vaccinated person was on supplemental oxygen. But the treatment for that person was due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), not COVID, the report said.</p> <p>During previous stages of the pandemic, "you could hear the oxygen whooshing out of the wall sockets, you could hear the ventilators beeping," one infectious disease doctor at the hospital told the Financial Times. "But now the vast majority of patients are like any other ward."</p> <p>Dr. Anthony Fauci, the White House chief medical adviser and the face of the U.S. COVID response in both the Trump and Biden administrations, said in a Sunday interview with CNN that "the signals are a bit encouraging regarding the severity" of Omicron.</p> <p>"Thus far—though it's too early to really make any definitive statements about it—it does not look like there's a great degree of severity to it," Fauci said. "But we have really got to be careful before we make any determinations that it is less severe or it really doesn't cause any severe illness comparable to Delta."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 China officials: boycott, democracy summit
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/88ggax/china-olympics-boycott-democracy-summit
GIST	<p>With the U.S. announcing a diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics, the same week that President Joe Biden is set to host a democracy summit without China, authorities in Beijing and state media are in overdrive countering both diplomatic snubs.</p> <p>On Monday, the White House announced the boycott, in which athletes will still be free to attend but an official delegation will not be sent, of the Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games in Beijing in February.</p> <p>The move was to protest “egregious human rights abuses and atrocities” in Xinjiang, said White House press secretary Jen Psaki, adding that the U.S. government didn’t feel it right to “penalize athletes” by blocking them from competing.</p> <p>Later that day, Chinese state media started to hurl playground insults—a tactic that has become common in its commentary on the U.S. State-run news outlet <i>Global Times</i> claimed in a tweet that Chinese people are “relieved” about the boycott because fewer U.S. officials entering China means “fewer viruses will be brought in.”</p> <p>The same outlet previously claimed that COVID-19 was brought to China through an American cyclist who took part in the World Military Games in Wuhan in October 2019. Chinese state media have been aggressive in countering the Wuhan lab-leak theory by pushing its own conspiracy that the virus escaped from U.S. military base Fort Detrick.</p> <p>“No one would care about whether they come or not,” <i>Global Times</i> tweeted in reference to politicians calling for a boycott of the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>In a rare moment of domestic political cohesion, the diplomatic boycott has been lauded by both Republican and Democratic politicians in the U.S. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and Japan are also mulling potential boycotts of the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>In China’s first official response to the boycott, foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a press conference on Tuesday that China will be taking countermeasures, adding that the Winter Olympics is not a stage for political antics and manipulation.</p> <p>While on Chinese social media, the censors are hard at work regulating domestic discourse on the boycott. Searches for the phrase “Winter Olympics boycott” have been blocked, and the hashtag “uninvited U.S. politicians continue to hype boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics” has gained immense traction, racking up over 2 billion views.</p> <p>Tensions were already high between the superpowers after another recent snub to Beijing in the form of non-invitation to U.S. Summit for Democracy, set to be held virtually by President Joe Biden on Dec. 9 and 10.</p> <p>With attendees from over 100 countries, the virtual summit will gather leaders from democracies around the world to discuss defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting human rights. China and Russia were conspicuously absent from the list of attendees, while representatives from Taiwan were invited—a move that triggered backlash from Beijing, which considers the island as its territory.</p> <p>The list of attendees stirred controversy generally, with countries like Singapore, Thailand, Egypt, and Turkey also left out. Speaking to reporters in Singapore, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said that the summit is not meant to be a place where attendees “sit in judgment of other countries.”</p>

In response to its exclusion from Biden's summit, China held the International Forum on Democracy on Saturday with the stated goal of breaking the "monism" and "narrative hegemony" of U.S.-style democracy, *Global Times* [reported](#).

During the forum, which according to state media featured hundreds of politicians and scholars from over 120 countries, Communist Party leaders emphasized the merits of China's version of democracy while declaring U.S. democracy "[seriously sick](#)."

There is no "one-size-fits-all" model of democracy, as a country's politics is rooted in its own culture, said Huang Kunming, head of the Chinese Communist Party's Publicity Department.

In the same speech, he described China's socialist democracy as the most genuine and effective, while on the same day China's State Council released a [white paper](#) titled *China: Democracy that Works*.

Chinese state media have run a series of op-eds denouncing Biden's upcoming democracy summit. In a tweet, editor-in-chief of the *Global Times* Hu Xijin likened China's democracy to a "bonfire that has just flared up", while describing the American one as "a pile of embers of a fading fire."

This most recent trading of snubs between the world's two largest economies comes amid mounting pressure on China regarding its human rights record.

Most recently, Peng Shuai, a women's tennis player who has represented China at various tournaments, disappeared in November after alleging that she was sexually assaulted by former vice premier Zhang Gaoli.

She later reappeared in a video call that left many unconvinced about her safety, as fellow tennis players raised concerns about her whereabouts, and the World Tennis Association [suspended its tournaments in China](#).

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HEADLINE	12/07 Tacoma selects new police chief
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article256408951.html
GIST	<p>Tacoma City Council unanimously voted Tuesday to appoint Avery Moore as the city's new police chief.</p> <p>He will start the job in mid-January.</p> <p>Moore, 55, is the assistant chief for the Investigations Bureau at the Dallas Police Department. He has been in law enforcement for more than 30 years.</p> <p>"I really, really am grateful and humble," Moore said in response to the confirmation. "I mean what I say. I think we have some challenges, certainly, but we're going to turn them into opportunities."</p> <p>City manager Elizabeth Pauli last week recommended Moore for the position. "He has proven his ability to connect with the public, to ably perform in prominent leadership roles and to lead through challenging situations," Pauli said.</p> <p>All Council members shared their support for Moore on Tuesday.</p> <p>"I'm excited about this. We've been focused on transformation for several years now, and the selection of a highly qualified police chief that could help us potentially transform the city of Tacoma and how we police our community is really important. This is a monumental moment," deputy mayor Keith Blocker said at Tuesday's meeting.</p> <p>Mayor Victoria Woodards said there were multiple things Moore said in his interviews that resonated with her, including, "Togetherness is how you fix stuff." "That's how you won me over — when you talked</p>

	<p>about the fact that police come in and fight all these battles alone, and solve them alone, but as a community how we solve anything ... is to do it together,” Woodards said.</p> <p>Moore was one of four finalists for the Tacoma police chief position and was selected as top pick earlier this week.</p> <p>The other candidates were Kathy McAlpine, who worked in Tacoma 31 years before leaving to be chief in Tigard, Oregon; Michael Carroll, who retired from the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office in San Leandro, California, after a 25-year career; and Sean Case, a captain with the Anchorage Police Department.</p> <p>The city has been searching for a police chief since Don Ramsdell retired in January after being at the helm of Tacoma Police Department for 17 years.</p> <p>The new chief will take over from Mike Ake, who was promoted from assistant chief to interim police chief after Ramsdell left.</p> <p>In an interview with The News Tribune, Moore called himself “a change agent” and said he knows how to navigate a diversified city thanks to his time in Dallas, the ninth largest police department in the country.</p> <p>Moore championed community policing, boosting officer morale, ensuring the department reflects the community and implementing a crisis response team to respond to calls involving mental health crises and homelessness-related issues. Moore was also a contender this summer to be police chief for the Columbus and Austin police departments, according to news reports.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Blue Angels return to Seafair in 2022, 2023
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3271724/blue-angels-return-seafair-2022/
GIST	<p>A Seattle summer tradition will return next year: The Blue Angels will be back at Seafair.</p> <p>On Tuesday, the Seafair Festival announced that the U.S. Navy Blue Angels Flight Demonstration Squadron will return in 2022. The air show over Lake Washington was canceled the last two summers — in 2020 and 2021 — due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>To extend the good news, the Blue Angels said they will also be back in 2023.</p> <p>In the past two years, Seafair took place in a virtual format that included online activities and at-home contests. The festival did hold some hybrid in-person events in 2021, including the Seafair Triathlon and the Torchlight 5K run, as well as a caravan of clowns, pirates, and parade marshals that visited select neighborhoods to bring the parade to the people.</p> <p>Tickets are available now for some of Seafair’s events for 2022, and all events will be available for purchase in February. There are tickets available for reserved seats at the Seafair Summer 4th at Gas Works Park on July 4, and reserved seats for the Alaska Airlines Torchlight Parade on July 30. You can also find one-day and three-day general admission passes on sale for the Seafair Weekend Festival.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Seattle business owners, homeless grapple
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3271588/tension-seattle-business-owners-homeless-concrete-barriers/
GIST	<p>With an estimated 40% of Seattle’s homeless population living out of vehicles, the issue of where those recreational vehicles and cars are placed is a sore spot for the city. Some local business owners have taken the issue into their own hands by installing concrete barriers in front of their businesses to dissuade prospective campers.</p>

The issue is most apparent in Seattle's industrial areas. Fremont in particular has made liberal use of the so called "ecology blocks." Fremont Brewing's production facilities have previously been cited under Seattle's municipal code for placement of such obstructions, as [reported](#) by PubliCola.

Employees and business owners in the area have been up front about their intent to use the barricades to avoid conflict with unhoused individuals living out of personal vehicles.

"We battle every day with these guys," Bobby Williams, an employee on Northwest 47th Street, told KIRO 7 TV. "They leave garbage, needles, and everything else right here all day."

The problem is that the tactic of installing concrete barriers, such as the ecology blocks, is explicitly condemned by the city, deemed a public nuisance under SMC 15.04.

Homeless advocates have pushed back against the tactic as well. They argue the city feigns ignorance as to who places the barriers as reason for their disinterest in leveling penalties against businesses such as Fremont Brewing for erecting the barriers.

"The city complains they do not know who put them there when its often obvious when its around a business," Rev. Bill Kirlin-Hackett told KIRO 7 TV.

Kirlin-Hackett has filed a complaint with the city against the ecology blocks, but says Seattle has not acted on the issue and refuses to issue citations.

The blocks have proliferated in the city after its suspension of a [72-hour parking enforcement policy](#) during the pandemic in April 2020. The suspension was lifted in October 2021, but many vehicles remain.

Seattle City Council has provisioned for the problem in 2022. They have transferred to the Regional Homelessness Authority (RHA) a project called "Safe Lots," intended to create designated spaces for campers in areas which do not conflict with the community. The council's 2022 budget has allocated \$1.5 million for the project as well as vehicle resident outreach.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Seattle clears Ballard homeless camp
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3271206/seattle-clears-ballard-commons-homeless-camp/
GIST	<p>The City of Seattle has officially closed the Ballard Commons for damage assessment, with Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) crews installing fencing around the park until maintenance concludes.</p> <p>In the process, the city's Human Services Department (HSD), in partnership with community organizers, relocated "at least 66 people" into low income housing or shelter options.</p> <p>"In August we created a census of everyone living in the park, in September we created a needs assessment to match people with shelter that was right for them, and in October we began moving people inside. We continued moving people inside in November and December, and this is how we can remove an encampment without pushing people down the street or into the neighborhood," Councilmember Dan Strauss wrote in a statement.</p> <p>HSD's Homelessness Outreach and Provider Ecosystem (HOPE) Team was successful in relocating 60 individuals from the commons into 24/7 enhanced shelters with wraparound onsite services, which will include case management and housing navigation intended to help end individual homelessness. Another four people were referred to housing. The remaining two used either Diversion or supportive services as they were relocated out of the Ballard Commons.</p>

	<p>The aforementioned community organizers include REACH, Catholic Community Services, DESC's HOST, the Scofflaw Mitigation Team, the Ballard Alliance, the HOPE Team, SPR, and Councilmember Strauss.</p> <p>"The strong partnership between the Mayor's office, Councilmember Strauss, REACH, key City departments and the Ballard Alliance provided an intensive and thoughtful outreach process that has resulted in a successful transition of unhoused individuals living in Ballard Commons Park into appropriate, needs-based housing and shelter options," wrote Ballard Alliance Executive Director Mike Stewart in a statement.</p> <p>"We are very appreciative of the City's intensive work over the past eight weeks to address the needs of unhoused individuals living in Ballard Commons Park and, at the same time, address the needs of surrounding businesses and residents," he added. "We look forward to the rehabilitation of Ballard Commons Park, a vital amenity for the community that provides much-needed green space within a dense, residential environment."</p> <p>As of 3 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 6, the city reports that its HOPE Team identified three people residing onsite who have not yet accepted shelter offers.</p> <p>The encampment removal marks another success in the city's work to expand its human outreach efforts, relocating homeless individuals into shelters with access to wraparound services.</p> <p>Seattle reports that its HOPE Team has made over 1,000 shelter referrals since the year's start, among 105 citywide encampments. This fall, Seattle has opened over 350 new shelter spaces, and anticipates another 2,837 by year's end, a 530 unit increase over pre-pandemic levels.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Drones as deadly new wildcard in Mideast
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/iran-drones-iraq-militias/2021/12/06/5685e772-5469-11ec-8769-2f4ecd7a2ad_story.html
GIST	<p>The assassins' weapon was a souped-up hobby drone, the kind that can be bought online for a few thousand dollars. It featured four helicopter-like rotors, an oversize battery and a small bomb, compact but powerful enough to blow up a car or, potentially, to kill a head of state.</p> <p>Investigators who studied fragments of the device — one of two drones that targeted the official residence of the Iraqi prime minister on Nov. 7 — quickly pinned the attack on powerful Iraqi militia groups backed by Iran. The bomb itself, experts concluded, was of a design previously linked to Iran.</p> <p>A third finding came as a surprise to some analysts: Tehran did not authorize the attack, Iraqi officials concluded, and in fact strongly opposed it. Instead, the attempt on the life of Iraqi leader Mustafa al-Kadhimi appears to have been the work of private militias that are now armed with drones and feeling emboldened to carry out strikes with potentially catastrophic consequences — sometimes without waiting for approval from their ostensible sponsors.</p> <p>Last month's attack has underscored what intelligence officials and analysts describe as a growing threat to stability in the Middle East and beyond: the proliferation of attack drones, particularly among paramilitary groups with close ties to Iran. Over the past two years — and most strikingly since early summer — Shiite militants have acquired new fleets of unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, capable of small-scale, but highly accurate, strikes on a wide array of military and civilian targets.</p> <p>Western intelligence officials estimate that militants in Iraq and Syria alone have acquired "scores" of new drones, ranging from sophisticated Iranian-built models, capable of long-distance flights, to cheaper off-the-shelf UAVs operated by remote control and modified to carry small but powerful explosives. Current and former intelligence officials said Iran began directly supplying at least two types of UAVs to its militia allies in Iraq shortly after the Trump administration's targeted killing of Major Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the</p>

commander of the elite Quds Force division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who died in a U.S. drone strike outside Baghdad's airport in early 2020.

The arming of Iraqi militias followed earlier decisions by Tehran to provide lethal drones to Houthi rebels in Yemen and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. The Quds Force, which supports and arms Iran's network of foreign militias, also has supplied computerized operating systems for the aircraft, as well as training for militants on how to modify commercial UAVs for military use, according to the Western intelligence officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence.

Yet, after equipping its militia allies with drones and know-how, Tehran appears to be losing its grip over how the aircraft are used, some officials and analysts say. Current and former U.S. and Iraqi officials said military discipline within Iran's network of Shiite militias in Iraq has deteriorated since the death of Soleimani, who was revered by the groups and tightly controlled militant operations. The spread of drone technology has coincided with the militias' plummeting popularity within Iraq, a change in fortune that spurred open feuding with Iraq's government as well as a quiet chafing against restraints imposed by their Iranian backers, officials and experts say.

"Once these things are in the wild, it's harder to control how they're used," said Michael Knights, a military analyst and editor of the [Militia Spotlight](#) blog, which tracks militant activity and propaganda in Iraq and Syria.

There are about 3,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and American service members and diplomats have been among [the targets of militia drone strikes](#) in recent months, raising fears about the possibility of a deadly attack that could trigger a military crisis with Iran — regardless of whether there is clear evidence linking the strike to Tehran.

The consequences of a deadly attack on Iraqi government officials could be equally grave. The attempt against Kadhimi, had it succeeded, could have plunged Iraq into chaos, igniting new clashes between the country's ethnic and religious factions.

In either scenario, Iran could find itself facing blame for a crisis that it did not actively precipitate. By supplying UAVs to militants, Iran appears to have calculated that it could strengthen its leverage with groups that have traditionally served as proxy forces, able to carry out operations with Iran's blessing while allowing Tehran to deny involvement. But as militia groups take on new weapons and greater risks, the stakes have risen considerably, current and former officials say.

"Some of the groups frankly don't see themselves anymore as primarily Iranian proxies, but as independent actors who don't need permission from anybody to do what they want," said Matthew Levitt, a former counterterrorism analyst for the FBI and Treasury Department and now a researcher with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a nonpartisan think tank.

With armed drones added to the mix, Levitt said, there's a "widespread concern that there will be an overreaction that will spill out of control."

A near miss

According to Iraqi investigators, the Nov. 7 attack involved two drones that swooped down on Kadhimi's official residence just after 2 a.m. One of the UAVs either crashed harmlessly or was shot down. The other successfully delivered a small explosive device that destroyed a car and inflicted extensive damage to the exterior of the building, located in Baghdad's ultra-secure Green Zone.

At least six security guards sustained non-life-threatening injuries. Police quickly recovered the downed drone, with its distinctive four rotors. Still attached to the aircraft was a small black bomb that, according to one munitions expert, bore "strong indications" of Iranian design.

Kadhimi was unharmed, and it is unclear whether he was in the building at the time. Hours after the attempt, he appeared on Iraqi television to appeal for calm and denounce unnamed “criminal armed groups” responsible for the attempted assassination.

Within days, other Iraqi officials identified the likely culprits as operatives linked to three powerful and well-known Shiite militias: Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada. All three have Iranian backing, although Asaib Ahl al-Haq’s relations with Tehran have come under strain. Among the groups’ leaders are several outspoken Kadhimi critics who have issued veiled threats against the prime minister through social media.

The three groups publicly denied any involvement in the attacks, and social media accounts linked to the militants sought to deflect blame by promoting alternative theories, without credible evidence. “No one in Iraq has the desire to waste a drone” on the house of a prime minister, a Kataib Hezbollah official wrote in a posting after the attack.

Iran quietly dispatched a key Revolutionary Guard envoy to Baghdad to reassure Iraqi officials while publicly condemning all who participated in the strike. Ali Shamkhani, the country’s top security official, denounced the attack as an act of “sedition” while also suggesting a possible culprit: The hit could be ultimately “traced back to foreign think tanks,” he said.

Iraqi officials, apparently fearing a backlash from the groups’ powerful supporters, have refrained from publicly naming suspects. At a news conference Nov. 28, Iraq’s national security adviser, Qassem al-Araji, described the drones as “locally made,” and appealed to the Iraqi public to supply information that could help solve the crime.

The attack was the most serious incident to date in a widening rift between Kadhimi’s government and Iraq’s network of Iran-backed militias. Established in 2014 as part of Iraq’s fight against the Islamic State, the groups quickly gained popularity in Shiite-dominated southern Iraq, where tens of thousands of young men enlisted for service. More recently, support for the groups dwindled amid accusations of corruption and self-dealing, and further collapsed after [Iran-backed militants participated in the killings of hundreds of protesters](#) during a series of demonstrations that swept Iraq.

The Nov. 7 attack occurred in the wake of Oct. 10 parliamentary elections that dealt a surprising setback to the militants and their political allies. Although the bloc supported by the militias won the most votes, its share of the country’s 329 parliamentary seats dropped by almost two-thirds.

The biggest beneficiary of the electoral shift, [Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr](#), denounced the assassination attempt as an act of terrorism. Sensing an opportunity, he launched a rhetorical offensive against the militia groups, vowing to fight all who sought to “return Iraq to a state of chaos to be controlled by non-state forces.”

Since January, militants have launched at least six drone attacks against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. In April, a drone armed with explosives attacked a coalition headquarters building in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil. On July 5, a “quadcopter” drone nearly identical to the ones used on Nov. 7 was shot down by U.S. forces near the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Three weeks later, yet another quadcopter drone of the same kind was discovered on the rooftop of a building just across the Tigris River from the embassy.

In several cases, the bombs attached to the drones were identical to the one used in the attack on Kadhimi, according to Militia Spotlight, which said that the drones themselves featured upgraded power and communication systems that “suggest a talented engineering team.”

While the explosives are generally too small to inflict major damage, even a small commercial or “hobby” drone, if upgraded and armed, is capable of killing or wounding, said Douglas Barrie, an analyst with the Britain-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. The one used Nov. 7 was typical of UAVs used in crude but effective one-way “kamikaze” strikes, he said.

	“The blast effect is modest, given the size of these things and the payload they can carry,” said Barrie, author of a primer on Iranian UAVs . “But if you’re looking to use them as a terror weapon or as an assassination tool, they’re still potentially effective.”
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HEADLINE	12/07 Omicron ‘much more extensive escape’
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/07/omicron-escape-antibodies/
GIST	<p>The first in-depth laboratory study of the omicron variant of the coronavirus offers a mixed bag of bad news and good news.</p> <p>The bad: This variant is extremely slippery. It eludes a great deal of the protection provided by disease-fighting antibodies. That means people who previously recovered from a bout of covid-19 could be reinfected. And people who have been vaccinated could suffer breakthrough infections.</p> <p>But the findings of the study, which tested the omicron variant of the coronavirus against the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, aren’t entirely bleak. The study, released Tuesday, found that even if the power of vaccines is diminished in the face of omicron, there’s still some protection afforded against the virus. And it suggests that booster shots could be key in the battle with the variant.</p> <p>The implications of the findings for vaccine strategy are, at this point, unclear. It is a good sign that the Pfizer vaccine retains some punch against the omicron variant, but these lab experiments are a highly artificial way of testing how vaccines hold up.</p> <p>Vaccine makers are working to reboot their vaccines with omicron-specific shots, but it is uncertain whether they will be needed or whether the protection from shots and boosters based on the strain of the virus that emerged two years ago will be sufficient.</p> <p>The experimental study, from leading scientists in South Africa, was described in a preprint paper not yet peer-reviewed. The scientists reported a large, 41-fold drop in the virus-blocking ability of antibodies — “much more extensive escape” than seen against previous variants using similar experiments.</p> <p>Still, previous infection followed by vaccination or a booster is likely to “confer protection from severe disease in Omicron infection,” the study said.</p> <p>The study is one of the first clues that will help inform pharmaceutical companies and policymakers trying to decide whether the global vaccination strategy needs to be updated with an omicron-specific shot.</p> <p>The data reinforces the need for people to get booster shots when eligible. But the lab experiment is just one piece of the puzzle, which will also depend on how the virus spreads in the general population and whether it is more likely to cause severe disease, something not easily determined in the first weeks of a new variant’s identification.</p> <p>“Omicron evades most of the vaccine response,” said Michel C. Nussenzweig, a Rockefeller University investigator who was not part of the South Africa research team but whose experiments predicted a similar drop in antibodies’ power. He stopped short of saying that vaccines will have to be rebooted to match omicron’s highly mutated spike protein.</p> <p>“We don’t know what will happen with hospitalization or severe disease. If vaccines are keeping people out of the hospital and are making what could be a bad disease into something like a common cold, or something a bit more severe but not life-threatening in any way, then we’re good,” Nussenzweig said.</p> <p>Multiple scientists said the results are not a reason to panic.</p> <p>“Thank goodness we have some concrete data now,” Benjamin Neuman, a virologist at Texas A&M University, said in an email. He said scientists had worried that omicron would be able to elude entirely</p>

the first line of defense, the neutralizing antibodies. Not so. The lab research supports the need for boosters, he added.

“It looks like quantity of antibodies will overcome the natural resistance of omicron, and that is a very good thing,” he said. “Boosters not only let the body make more diverse antibodies, they also raise antibody levels. In other words, Omicron may be vaccine-resistant, but it is not booster-proof.”

William Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, said of the new laboratory finding, “In terms of keeping a cool head about it, I think it’s not great, but it’s considerably better than it might be.”

Hanage noted that people with previous infections and vaccinations showed protection, which supports the argument from public health officials that people should not rely solely on the immunity conferred by recovery from an infection.

Scientists had previously shown, through experiments, the immune-evading traits of some of the dozens of mutations that have made omicron a “variant of concern.” Most of the mutations are clustered in three areas along the virus’s spike protein, the primary target of antibodies produced through vaccination. Some of those mutations impair the ability of antibodies to bind with the virus and potentially prevent it from infecting a cell.

Initial data indicate that omicron may be more transmissible even than delta, the variant that became dominant throughout the world this summer. There is no solid evidence that omicron is more or less likely to cause severe disease. Most scientists caution it is premature to reach conclusions given that the most severe cases of covid-19, including those that are fatal, typically take many weeks to play out and omicron has only recently been identified.

David R. Martinez, a viral immunologist at the University of North Carolina’s Gillings School of Global Public Health, said it is important to realize that other parts of the immune system protect people against severe disease.

“If you’re a healthy person, you’re probably going to be largely protected because your immune system is so much more than neutralizing antibodies,” Martinez said. “We’re certainly, by no means of the imagination, back to square one in March of 2020.”

What happens next will depend in large part on the real-world data.

“Extrapolating from ... lab assays to what happens clinically is uncertain. What remains the most important indicator [of] how serious a threat Omicron poses to fully vaccinated people will come from hospitalization data in the coming weeks,” said John P. Moore, an immunologist at Weill Cornell Medicine.

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HEADLINE	12/07 First plant-based coronavirus vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/07/plant-coronavirus-vaccine-gsk-medicago-covlp/
GIST	<p>Pharmaceutical companies Medicago and GlaxoSmithKline announced on Tuesday “positive efficacy and safety results” from a global trial using what they say is the world’s first plant-based coronavirus vaccine.</p> <p>The late-stage trial, which studied 24,000 adults across six countries, found that the overall efficacy rate of the vaccine candidate was 71 percent, rising to 75.3 percent against “COVID-19 of any severity for the globally dominant Delta variant.” However, the trial did not include the newly identified omicron variant.</p> <p>The global Phase 3 placebo-controlled efficacy study used Canada-based Medicago’s plant-based vaccine in combination with British drugmaker GSK’s pandemic adjuvant, an ingredient that works to boost the immune response and efficacy of others’ vaccines.</p>

It does not yet have a brand name, the companies said, but is currently referred to as “CoVLP.”

Plant-based vegan and vegetarian alternatives in food and materials markets have become increasingly popular globally, as consumers choose them for environmental or religious reasons, but Brian Ward, medical officer at Medicago, told The Washington Post that it would not be appropriate to categorize the vaccine candidate as such: “The plants that are used simply act as bioreactors to produce the antigen.”

The companies said they hoped the vaccine would diversify the current pool of shots available and said the trial had shown that it was “well-tolerated, with no related serious adverse events reported in the vaccine group.”

“This is an incredible moment for Medicago and for novel vaccine platforms. The results of our clinical trials show the power of plant-based vaccine manufacturing technology,” Takashi Nagao, CEO and president of Medicago, said in a statement. “If approved, we will be contributing to the world’s fight against the COVID-19 pandemic with the world’s first plant-based vaccine for use in humans.”

The vaccine candidate has not been approved by any regulatory authority.

However, Medicago said it would “imminently” file its final regulatory submission to Health Canada. It also said it had initiated the regulatory filing process with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Britain’s Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, while preliminary discussions were also underway with the World Health Organization.

The WHO previously called plant-based vaccines, made by producing antigens in genetically modified plants that can then be extracted and purified by conventional methods, a “new and exciting possibility.”

“Plant-derived vaccines have several advantages,” the WHO said, including being “produced cheaply in very high amounts,” using carrier plants such as potatoes and corn. The antigens created “are stable and can be stored for long periods of time,” it said, adding that “the likelihood that contamination by a plant virus would have an adverse effect on humans is almost negligible.”

GSK’s chief global health officer, Thomas Breuer, called the results “encouraging” in a statement, especially as coronavirus variants emerge.

“The combination of GSK’s established pandemic adjuvant with Medicago’s plant-based vaccine technology has significant potential to be an effective, refrigerator-stable option to help protect people against SARS-CoV-2,” he said.

Quebec-based Medicago has been developing its plant-based technology for the past 20 years, it said, producing “Virus-Like Particles” for its protein vaccines — which it describes as akin to creating empty shells. The particles mimic the structure of viruses, allowing them to be easily recognized by the immune system and induce an immune response similar to a natural infection. But because they lack core genetic material, they are noninfectious and unable to replicate.

Medicago said its vaccination regimen calls for two doses given intramuscularly 21 days apart and for the vaccine to be stored at 36 to 46 degrees Fahrenheit (2 to 8 degrees Celsius).

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HEADLINE	12/07 Snowpack in West off to bad start
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/07/snow-west-us-low-drought/
GIST	December marks the start of meteorological winter — when temperatures plunge, heavy coats are in fashion and kids begin picking their teams for snowball fights.

But the snow season usually starts in October in the Rocky Mountains. By the end of November, snow depth on the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, and eastward to the interior Rockies typically ranges from 2 inches at lower elevations to over 20 inches on the highest elevations.

So what have we seen this year? Unfortunately, not much.

The lackluster snowpack is particularly worrisome amid widespread drought in the region — 94 percent of the West is experiencing drought, and many lakes and reservoirs are at historically low levels. A healthy snowpack this winter could help replenish water levels during the spring melt season — but if snowpack is limited, deficits will grow.

Current conditions

Warm and dry conditions this fall have led to significant snowfall deficits across the western United States. November was warmer than average, and precipitation was below average everywhere except Washington state, which had a string of storms that caused [major flooding](#).

The National Weather Service reported high elevation snowfall lagging behind by 10 to 20 inches last month. This snowfall in the west is critical for filling the region's largest natural "reservoir" — mountain snowpack.

Snowpack is the amount of water in the snow that rests on the ground, slowly building for the duration of the cold season. Once snowpack reaches its peak in the spring, it melts and recharges the soils, rivers and many reservoirs that provide water for millions of Americans.

Snowpack in the Upper Green basin in western Wyoming commonly increases by 2 inches in November; this year, it increased by less than an inch. Basin snowpack is at a 1.5-inch deficit — at 56 percent of normal.

The Upper Green basin isn't alone. Every basin in the west is below normal, ranging from as little as 2 percent of normal on the Lower Colorado in Arizona to 81 percent of normal for the Upper Columbia in Washington.

There's still time

It's a pretty bleak picture for the start of winter. The bad news is that early season snowpack is an important contribution to the peak snowpack. The good news is that 1) we've got a lot of time left, and 2) we can still make up these deficits.

Projection graphics produced by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) show current basin snowpack and projections of possible future accumulations to peak. These projections are based on the history of the [SNOTEL](#) stations in the basin.

For the Central Lahontan basin (Lake Tahoe and surrounding area), the most likely scenario (50th percentile line) is for below-normal peak snowpack. In other words, if the basin receives average snowpack for the rest of the cold season, peak snowpack would be about 80 percent of normal — hence why early snowpack is important for overall accumulation.

The graph shows potential scenarios for the Central Lahontan basin (Lake Tahoe and surrounding area). The most likely scenario for this winter season is the 50th percentile line.

The 70th percentile shows a more aggressive scenario, where the basin gets an above-average snowpack for the rest of the season. Peak snowpack would then be near normal. This scenario is harder to achieve (about a 30 percent chance), but not out of the realm of possibility.

Most of the basins around the West show a similar story: average snowpack for the rest of the cold season would result in lower peak snowpack, but normal peak snowpack is still technically within reach.

Return to Top	<p>One factor that can affect the region's winter precipitation is the current La Niña, which is likely to continue through the winter and into the spring. While it's not always a perfect relationship, we tend to see above-average snowfall in the northwest and below-average snowfall in the southwest during La Niña winters.</p> <p>If this pans out, the Pacific Northwest and northern Rockies are more likely to get average peak snowpack, but the southern basins would more likely peak below average.</p> <p>One other challenge to contend with is the temperature outlook. The Climate Prediction Center's seasonal outlook calls for a greater chance of above-average temperatures for Utah, Colorado and to the south.</p> <p>Above-average temperatures for the lower elevation areas would increase the likelihood of melting, and could also result in earlier and lower peak snowpack. The Pacific Northwest is expected to see below-average temperatures.</p> <p>With the La Niña and temperature forecasts, the odds are better for Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana to have a decent winter, even after a poor start. Northern California, the Great Basin, Wyoming, and the northern reaches of Utah and Colorado could also recover. The areas that are likely to be in the worst shape in the spring would be the central and southern mountains of Utah and Colorado and the rest of the Southwest.</p> <p>It's still early enough in the season for things to turn around, however, so let's all hope for some holiday magic in the form of snowflakes!</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Abnormally warm winter run-up weather
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/07/warm-winter-weather-united-states/
GIST	<p>Winter technically starts on Dec. 21 but, for the two weeks leading up to it, it will feel more like spring across much of the United States. The central and eastern Lower 48 are in line for an extended period of unseasonable warmth.</p> <p>The National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center is projecting high chances of above-average temperatures for the eastern two-thirds of the nation both six to 10 and eight to 14 days into the future.</p> <p>The core of the warmth in the eight-to-14-day outlook is centered over the mid-South, Tennessee and Ohio valleys, southern Great Lakes and interior Mid-Atlantic, where there's a 90 to 100 percent chance of above-average temperatures. In other words, unusually mild weather is virtually a lock. According to Brian Brettschneider, a climatologist and researcher in Alaska, the Climate Prediction Center hasn't been this confident in such extensive warmth eight to 14 days into the future since 2015.</p> <p>The predicted warmth builds on record-setting high temperatures that kicked off December across large parts of the Lower 48 states. Four states tied or established record highs for the month last week. A brief blast of cold air is displacing the warmth for a few days this week but will not last.</p> <p>This week's warmth</p> <p>The week got off to a warm start on Monday when temperatures climbed 20 degrees above average along the Eastern Seaboard ahead of a strong cold front that brought tornadoes to Tennessee. Washington, D.C., hit 70 on Monday before dropping 14 degrees in an hour as the cold front blew through, with winds gusting to 49 mph. Average highs in the nation's capital this time of year hover around 51 degrees. Baltimore also made it to 70, while Philadelphia climbed to 67 degrees and New York to 61.</p> <p>Parts of the Mid-Atlantic are expected to receive some festive snowflakes Wednesday before temperatures spike above 70 degrees once again on Saturday ahead of a front. That warmth is already gathering across the Plains and will sweep east over the coming days.</p>

Oklahoma City is expected to hit 72 degrees on Thursday and 76 on Friday, which would break a daily record that has stood since 1996. The Sooner State's capital is ordinarily in the lower 50s this time of year. Highs will fall back into the upper 40s on Saturday before a warm-up early next week.

Dallas-Fort Worth will flirt with records, too, as highs climb into the 80s later this week. Friday's number to beat for a record is 84 degrees, which is in reach but may be a bit of a stretch. That record was set back in 1938. The forecast is for highs a solid 20 to 25 degrees higher than the upper 50s that are more characteristic of mid-December.

Next week's warmth

The warmth will be squashed east into Saturday, with the day beginning 30 degrees above average from the Midwest eastward. Temperatures will drop 20 degrees or more in just a few hours along the front, but they won't stay low for long.

Weather models depict another surge of top-tier warmth becoming established over the center of the county early next week. Any periodic cool-downs will be tepid and fleeting.

Some modeling suggests that the intensity of the next week's zone of high pressure or "heat dome" supporting the mild weather [could be historic for the time of year](#).

Temperatures next week could average 10 to 20 degrees above normal east of the Rockies. Here's what this might mean for high temperatures most days next week:

- Dallas: Highs in the 70s
- Oklahoma City: Highs in the 60s to near 70.
- Chicago: Highs in the 50s to near 60.
- Atlanta and Nashville: Highs in the 60s
- Washington: Highs in the 50s and 60s
- New York: Highs in the 50s
- Boston: Highs near 50

What's behind the warmth?

A number of factors are conspiring to yield the enduring above-average temperatures. High pressure south of the Aleutian Islands in the Pacific near the international date line has been responsible for a dip in the jet stream offshore of the West Coast between Alaska and Hawaii, [where it has been quite stormy](#). That, in turn, allows the jet stream to slice northeastward over the Northern Rockies and Upper Midwest, permitting warmth to build to its south.

It also enhances the southwesterly component of winds over much of the central United States, resulting in downsloping, or the forcing of air down the mountains — in this case the Continental Divide and Rockies. That leads to warming and drying, which in a sense is a self-reinforcing process. It's no wonder the Plains have been warm to borderline hot.

The effects of human-induced climate change are also playing a role, tipping the scales toward warmth. In the absence of human influence, heat extremes and cold extremes would remain roughly balanced. Instead, a 2.5-to-1 ratio of daily hot versus cold records has been observed in the United States this year — [30,511 to 12,177, to be exact](#).

That preferential tendency toward heat extremes becomes even more marked globally, particularly when comparing all-time records. So far this year, 704 record high maximum temperatures have been recorded worldwide, and only 134 record lows. That's more than a 5-to-1 ratio.

As the Earth continues to warm because of human activities, late-season heat and bizarre winter warm-ups will become increasingly common and greater in magnitude.

	The Climate Prediction Center favors above-average temperatures sticking around in the central and eastern United States for most of winter, although occasional incursions of cold air should still be expected.
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HEADLINE	12/07 WHO: omicron variant ‘already everywhere’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/omicron-covid-variant-is-already-everywhere-who-says
GIST	<p>The Omicron coronavirus variant is “already everywhere” and travel bans will not stop its spread, the World Health Organization’s top Europe official has said, as the archbishop of Canterbury called for the scrapping of a “travel apartheid”.</p> <p>As mounting numbers of cases are detected and evidence suggests the Omicron variant transmits faster than Delta, 43 countries in the European region have imposed travel restrictions.</p> <p>But Dr Hans Kluge, the WHO’s regional director for Europe, said bans on incoming flights did not work and were too late “because Omicron is already everywhere”. “Omicron is in sight and on the rise and we are right to be concerned and cautious,” he said. At the same time, he added, vaccines, masks, ventilation and treatments were the best way to curb coronavirus – not travel restrictions.</p> <p>Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, also backed calls to scrap travel restrictions amid criticism of the UK’s red list ban of 11 African countries, adding that sharing vaccines with other countries was “the only route out of this pandemic”.</p> <p>Writing on Twitter, Welby said: “We must find fair and effective approaches for those who are vaccinated and tested to enter the UK. I agree with the Nigerian High Commissioner to the UK – we cannot have ‘travel apartheid’.</p> <p>“It is also morally wrong – and self-defeating – effectively to punish other nations for being transparent when they discover new Covid variants.”</p> <p>Kluge said the evidence so far on Omicron was preliminary and there was no definitive evidence on how well vaccines would protect people. “It has yet to be seen how and whether the latest Covid-19 variant of concern, Omicron, will be more transmissible and more severe,” he said.</p> <p>He said there were “five pandemic stabilisers to keep mortality down”. They were increasing vaccination rates; administering boosters to the most vulnerable; doubling mask-wearing rates indoors; ventilating crowded spaces; and adopting “rigorous therapeutic protocols for severe cases”.</p> <p>Kluge said there was a need to avoid both school closures and home learning. He also said that, as school holidays approached, “we must acknowledge that children contaminate their parents and grandparents at home, with a 10-times increased risk for these adults to develop severe disease, be hospitalised or die when non-vaccinated”.</p> <p>He said: “The use of masks and ventilation, and regular testing, should be a standard at all primary schools and vaccinating children should be discussed and considered nationally, as part of school protection measures.</p> <p>“Vaccination of younger children not only reduces their role in Covid-19 transmission but also protects them from paediatric severity, whether associated with long Covid or multi-system inflammatory syndromes.”</p> <p>Kluge also said vaccines should only be mandated at a population level as a last resort, adding that whatever measures countries were taking against Delta would also provide benefit against Omicron.</p>

	<p>Dr Catherine Smallwood, a senior emergency officer at the WHO regional office for Europe, said that although travel bans “may be easily accessible in terms of political decision-making, they are not effective in preventing spread of disease”.</p> <p>Smallwood said Delta remained dominant at the moment but that might change. “Clearly Omicron has demonstrated an ability to spread rapidly within a Delta context and within our highly vaccinated context, particularly in gatherings where Covid-19 likes to spread anyway, so Christmas parties, workplace gatherings, conferences – we’ve seen these clusters of Omicron appear in countries across the region.</p> <p>“So there will be further spread. The extent and the rapidity of the speed of that spread is still a question and we’ll find out in a few more weeks.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 IOC ‘respects’ US diplomatic boycott
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/07/ioc-says-it-respects-us-boycott-of-beijing-winter-olympics
GIST	<p>The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has said that it respects the United States’ decision to diplomatically boycott the forthcoming Beijing Winter Olympics, while defending its “quiet diplomacy” in handling the case of Chinese tennis player, Peng Shuai.</p> <p>“We always ask for as much respect as possible and least possible interference from the political world,” said Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr, the IOC’s coordination commission chief for the Beijing Winter Olympics. “We have to be reciprocal. We respect the political decisions taken by political bodies.”</p> <p>The Biden administration on Monday announced a diplomatic boycott of the Games in response to what it called “ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses”. American athletes, however, are still expected to compete.</p> <p>China accused the US of “political posturing and manipulation” and tried to discredit the decision by claiming that American diplomats had not even been invited to Beijing in the first place. “The US should stop politicising sports, and stop disrupting and undermining the Beijing Winter Olympics, lest it should affect bilateral dialogue and cooperation in important areas and international and regional issues,” foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian warned.</p> <p>The move sparked a new round of disputes between the world’s two largest economies and prompted Beijing to warn on Tuesday that Washington will “pay a price” for its decision.</p> <p>The US last staged a full boycott of the Olympics during the cold war in 1980, when the former president Jimmy Carter snubbed the Moscow summer games along with 64 other countries and territories, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the previous year.</p> <p>The Soviet Union, in turn, protested against the US’s move by boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles summer Olympics with its allies.</p> <p>The IOC’s response to the US’s decision came 55 days before the Winter Olympics take place in February in Beijing. Earlier, the president of the IOC, Thomas Bach, said that his organisation cannot be expected to solve problems that politicians themselves have failed to clear up.</p> <p>“Expecting that Olympic Games can fundamentally change a country, its political system or its laws, is a completely exaggerated expectation,” said Bach, a German national. “The Olympics cannot solve problems that generations of politicians have not solved.”</p> <p>The growing calls to boycott the Winter Olympics come at a time when China’s relationship with many western capitals continues to deteriorate over Beijing’s treatment of its Uyghur population, and, more recently, one of its highest-profile tennis stars, Peng Shuai.</p>

	<p>The IOC in the past few weeks held two calls with the Chinese athlete, whose November essay on China's social media platform Weibo sparked a huge debate outside the country. In the now-censored lengthy post, she accused a retired senior official of having coerced her into sex.</p> <p>The IOC's approach, which it dubbed as "quiet diplomacy" or "silent diplomacy", has been criticised by human rights organisations. They alleged that the organisation was engaged in a "publicity stunt" for Beijing.</p> <p>"I hugely disagree," said Samaranch in response to a journalist's question about his organisation's handling of the Peng incident on Tuesday. "Everybody should be concentrating on the wellbeing of Peng Shuai and not trying to use this for any other purposes."</p> <p>He added: "We did that silent diplomacy in Afghanistan, and it paid off beautifully for many many people ... Don't write off the silent diplomacy. It's a very powerful tool."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Journalists in China 'nightmare' oppression
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/journalists-in-china-face-nightmare-worthy-of-mao-era-press-freedom-group-says
GIST	<p>Xi Jinping has created a "nightmare" of media oppression worthy of the Mao era, and Hong Kong's journalism is in "freefall", according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF).</p> <p>In a major report released on Wednesday, the journalism advocacy group detailed the worsening treatment of journalists and tightening of control over information in China, adding to an environment in which "freely accessing information has become a crime and to provide information an even greater crime".</p> <p>"No matter the topic, those who refuse to comply with the official narrative are accused of harming national unity."</p> <p>In the report's forward, RSF's secretary general, Christophe Deloire, said before Xi came to power in 2013, there was an emerging trend of improvements in press freedom, but he had "put a brutal end to this partial opening and restored a media culture worthy of the Maoist era".</p> <p>"This 'great leap backwards' of journalism in China is all the more terrifying given that the regime has immense financial and technological resources to achieve its goals," Deloire said.</p> <p>The report listed a growing number of "obstacles" to journalism, including online censorship and surveillance, paid amateur propagandists known as the "50 cent army", increasing use of detention without trial, Hong Kong's national security law, forced televised confessions, daily instructions from the Communist party to newsrooms and other platforms, use of allegations ranging from "picking quarrels" to espionage to silence journalists, and the weaponising of exit bans.</p> <p>As well as advances in surveillance and technology, the report also described a ruling introduced in October 2019 that all Chinese journalists must use a smartphone app called "Study Xi, Strengthen the Country", which cybersecurity experts had found could enable collection of personal data and remote access to the device's microphone.</p> <p>Harassment and intimidation of reporters both local and foreign has markedly increased, according to RSF and the Beijing Foreign Correspondents Club, in particular during coverage of the Henan flood disaster earlier this year. The Henan provincial government put out a tender for a journalist-specific surveillance system after the flooding.</p> <p>In 2020 at least 18 foreign correspondents from US outlets were expelled, while others were forced to flee, including the BBC's John Sudworth and Australian reporters Bill Birtles and Mike Smith, who had been investigating the national security arrest of Australian CGTN anchor Cheng Lei. Several citizen journalists</p>

	<p>were arrested for attempting to report from the Wuhan lockdown, while others have been targeted for their work on #MeToo cases.</p> <p>Until crackdowns in 2020 and 2021, Hong Kong’s media had been considered free and separate to the mainland’s controls, however RSF said that was no longer the case, and the sector was in “in freefall”.</p> <p>The report cited the arrest and jailing of journalists and media proprietors such as Apple Daily’s Jimmy Lai, the raiding of newsrooms, wholesale changes at public broadcaster RTHK, and lack of consequences for police violence against reporters.</p> <p>“The repression no longer spares Hong Kong, once a champion of press freedom, where a growing number of arrests are now conducted in the name of national security,” said Deloire.</p> <p>The report made several recommendations and appeals to authorities to improve the situation, but also listed detailed advice for journalists to protect themselves and their sources from technological surveillance and intimidation.</p> <p>It called on global democracies to “identify all appropriate strategies to dissuade the Beijing regime from pursuing its repressive policies and to support all Chinese citizens who love their country and want to defend the right to information”.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Storm Barra pummels Ireland; UK braces
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/07/storm-barra-thousands-without-power-ireland-met-office-uk
GIST	<p>More than 56,000 homes and businesses in Ireland have been left without power after Storm Barra made landfall, with winds gusting up to 80mph (130km/h) as it moved east throughout the day.</p> <p>Heavy rain, sleet and snow fell on Tuesday over the north-west of Ireland and Scotland, threatening further disruption to areas only just recovering from lengthy power cuts in the wake of Storm Arwen.</p> <p>Ireland’s national weather service, Met Éireann, said the storm could pose a danger to life over the next two days.</p> <p>The UK was also braced for strong winds and heavy showers, less than two weeks after Storm Arwen caused significant damage to parts of the country.</p> <p>Gusts of 69mph were recorded near Stranraer, in Dumfries and Galloway, while seven schools in the region have been shut. Restrictions are in place on bridges across Scotland including Skye and Erskine in the west, and Dornoch, the Forth road and Tay bridges on the east coast.</p> <p>The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (Sepa) warned the public that, as the storm moves north-east across the country, “we expect to see coastal flooding due to the combination of high tides, storm surge and large waves leading to potential wave overtopping”.</p> <p>In Aberdeenshire, one of the areas worst-hit by the damage of power cuts caused by Arwen, the council assured residents that welfare arrangements would remain in place over the coming days.</p> <p>Power cuts were reported in Cork, Kerry, Dublin and Limerick and people in three counties on the west coast were advised to remain indoors.</p> <p>Flooding in Cork and Kerry rendered several roads unpassable because of water or fallen trees.</p> <p>The storm coincided with high tide in Cork city, with flood waters flowing across South Mall from riverside quays in Morrison’s Island.</p>

A rare red weather alert was in place in counties Cork, Kerry and Clare, and orange wind warnings were issued for Limerick, Waterford, Galway, Mayo, Wexford, Dublin, Louth, Wicklow and Meath.

Schools in 12 counties subject to red and orange warnings were advised to close, while Aer Lingus cancelled all flights in and out of Cork with some services disrupted in Dublin.

In the UK, the Environment Agency issued three flood warnings for England's south coast, as well as 35 flood alerts.

Severe gales have led to travel disruption across the Isle of Man, with cancelled daytime ferry services between the island and Lancashire and several blocked roads due to fallen trees.

Fallen trees have blocked several roads around the island.

Yellow snow warnings were in place in northern England and Scotland, with blizzards and snowfall of up to 20cm causing treacherous conditions on roads at higher altitudes, the Met Office said.

The Met Office meteorologist Aidan McGivern said Storm Barra's gusts and impact would be "a notch down" compared with Arwen, which led to widespread power cuts on 26 November, some of which had not yet been restored.

Heavy rain was forecast in Northern Ireland and the south-west of the UK with drifting snow and blizzards turning heavy across northern hills.

On Monday, while about 1,600 households in the north-east of England were still without electricity almost two weeks after Storm Arwen struck, Boris Johnson said he had spoken to the chief executive of Northern Powergrid and had been "assured [customers] would be reconnected tomorrow at the latest".

That evening the electricity supplier said it had reduced the number of homes and businesses affected to 700.

Ice was forecast overnight in parts of the UK before Barra's arrival and the Met Office issued a yellow warning for potentially hazardous driving conditions in western Scotland and north-west England.

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HEADLINE	12/07 UAE establishes 'national working week'
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/uae-cuts-working-week-and-shifts-weekend-back-a-day
GIST	<p>The United Arab Emirates is cutting its working week to four-and-a-half days and moving its weekend from Friday-Saturday to Saturday-Sunday in a major shift aimed at improving the country's competitiveness, officials have said.</p> <p>The "national working week" will be mandatory for government bodies from 1 January and bucks the regional norm of a full day-off on Friday for Muslim prayers.</p> <p>While becoming the only Gulf state not to have a Friday-Saturday weekend, the move will bring the resource-rich and ambitious UAE into line with the non-Arab world.</p> <p>Under the new timetable, the public sector weekend starts at noon on Fridays and ends on Sunday. Friday prayers at mosques will be held after 1.15pm all year round.</p> <p>The move is intended to "better align the UAE with global markets", said the state news agency WAM, calling the new working week the shortest in the world.</p>

Return to Top	<p>“The UAE is the first nation in the world to introduce a national working week shorter than the global five-day week,” it said.</p> <p>The western-style weekend, rumoured for years, was announced less than a week after the former British protectorate celebrated the 50th anniversary of its formation.</p> <p>The UAE observed a Thursday-Friday weekend until 2006, when it moved to Fridays and Saturdays with the private sector following suit.</p> <p>“The extended weekend comes as part of the UAE government’s efforts to boost work-life balance and enhance social wellbeing, while increasing performance to advance the UAE’s economic competitiveness,” the WAM report said.</p> <p>“From an economic perspective, the new working week will better align the UAE with global markets, reflecting the country’s strategic status on the global economic map.</p> <p>“It will ensure smooth financial, trade and economic transactions with countries that follow a Saturday-Sunday weekend, facilitating stronger international business links and opportunities for thousands of UAE-based and multinational companies.”</p> <p>The new arrangement is another bold step for the UAE, which last year bucked decades of Arab consensus by normalising relations with Israel, unlocking hundreds of millions of dollars in deals.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Omicron weakens vaccine effectiveness
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-expected-to-be-dominant-strain-in-parts-of-europe-within-weeks-11638889781?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant of coronavirus can partially evade the protection afforded by vaccines, according to laboratory tests conducted in South Africa that give one of the first indications of vaccine effectiveness against the variant, but scientists say the shots should still defend those inoculated from severe disease.</p> <p>Scientists at the Africa Health Research Institute in South Africa tested the blood of 12 people vaccinated with the shot developed by Pfizer Inc. and Germany’s BioNTech SA against the Omicron variant to determine how effectively it neutralized the virus.</p> <p>They found the vaccine generated one-fortieth of the infection-fighting antibodies against Omicron compared with its performance against the original version of the virus. That is a big reduction but doesn’t mean the variant can escape vaccines completely, said Alex Sigal, the virologist who led the study.</p> <p>“The vaccine takes a hit but it is not a completely different ballgame,” he said on a video call with reporters. He said the findings are preliminary and estimates of effectiveness may change as more data becomes available. His team’s experiment didn’t study other types of immune responses that scientists say are critical in determining vaccines’ overall potency against disease.</p> <p>The results, published late Tuesday, came as government officials and scientists said that Omicron is weeks away from becoming the dominant strain in parts of Europe and other evidence from the U.K. and Norway suggested that vaccines may offer significant protection against severe illness from the variant.</p> <p>The evidence is likely to reinforce government efforts to broaden vaccination coverage and offer booster shots.</p>

“The escape of this variant is robust, it’s extensive. But it’s not complete,” said Mr. Sigal. His team found study participants who were fully vaccinated and had previously been infected with Covid-19 showed greater antibody responses against Omicron. Boosters should help those who haven’t been infected, he said.

“People who haven’t had a booster should get one, and people who previously were infected should get vaccinated,” he said.

The variant [has triggered border closures](#) world-wide in the run-up to Christmas and sparked new anxiety over how soon the world will be able to put the pandemic behind it. Omicron has been detected in 19 U.S. states so far, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said Tuesday, and the agency expects that number to increase.

The picture emerging from labs in South Africa, the [focus of the Omicron outbreak](#), and increasingly from Europe is that the variant is likely more transmissible than previous versions of the virus and may be able to more easily sidestep the immunity from prior infection or vaccination. It displays dozens of mutations, some linked to faster spread and some whose properties are entirely unknown.

Scientists are working to figure out how the variant spreads so quickly. U.K. public-health authorities say they have found evidence that an infection can be passed on sooner than with earlier variants. A newly infected person can seemingly pass on the virus to another host in as little as three days, compared with six days for earlier strains, said Martin Hibberd, professor of emerging infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

In countries where Omicron has been detected, cases so far have overwhelmingly been mild. Officials in Norway say that is likely because so many of the infections have been in vaccinated people. Many cases are still only a few days old, however, and scientists say it is too soon to be sure whether the level of disease severity reported reflects some property of Omicron itself, or is a result of factors such as the protection afforded by vaccination or prior infection, or age.

“It appears that with the cases that are seen, we are not seeing a very severe profile of disease,” said Anthony Fauci, the chief medical adviser to the Biden administration. Mr. Fauci added this could reflect the age of many of those known to be infected and cautioned that the data was still preliminary.

A forty-fold loss in antibody neutralization is roughly what immunologists were expecting, and it is a significant drop-off, said Luke O’Neill, chairman of biochemistry at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland. Still, he said the findings buttress the idea that the vaccines may not prevent infection, but will likely suffice to significantly reduce the risk of severe disease.

“That’s the view overall: that you should have sufficient protection to stop severe or even moderate disease: you may get some symptoms, a few people may even get hospitalized, but they should usually get discharged.”

On Tuesday, Pfizer Chief Executive Albert Bourla told attendees of The Wall Street Journal’s CEO Council Summit conference that Omicron appears to be more contagious but cause less severe disease. But he stressed that more work needs to be done to know for sure.

“I don’t think it’s good news to have something that spreads fast,” he said. “Spreads fast means that it will be in billions of people and another mutation may come. You don’t want that.”

The U.K. Health Security Agency said Tuesday it had recorded 437 confirmed cases of Omicron in Britain, less than two weeks after identifying the country’s first two cases. Francois Balloux, director of University College London’s Genetics Institute, and Neil Ferguson, professor of epidemiology at Imperial College, estimate the number of Omicron cases in the U.K. is currently doubling every three days. That suggests the variant could displace the dominant Delta strain as soon as next month, said Prof. Balloux.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers on Monday that none of those infected needed hospital treatment, though that was before the latest uptick in cases.

In Norway, 130 people who were at an upscale restaurant hosting a Nov. 26 company Christmas party have tested positive for Covid-19. About 30 of those cases are confirmed Omicron infections, authorities said Tuesday; the remainder are suspected of being so.

That outbreak offered epidemiologists an early, if anecdotal, glimpse into how easily the variant spreads among the vaccinated. Eleven days in, however, none of them has been hospitalized, which Norwegian authorities chalked up to the fact that only vaccinated employees were allowed to attend the party. Several are feeling better, and are due to be released from isolation Tuesday or Wednesday, said Tine Ravlo, the chief physician for Oslo's Frogner district.

"They're feeling OK," she said. The remainder have mild symptoms, like a cough, fever or a runny nose.

Still, Norway's government has tightened restrictions, which its disease-control agency, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, said Tuesday would be necessary until a clearer picture develops.

Meanwhile, Norway on Tuesday said it had reduced the waiting time for booster shots, and began offering them to more age groups and professions. A panel of scientists advising the U.K. government on vaccine policy recently recommended the booster shots be offered to all adults.

"We expect vaccines to retain their effectiveness in preventing severe Covid-19 disease even if they may not prevent infections," Preben Aavitsland, senior physician at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, wrote in an email. "The protection against severe disease is, however, not 100%. So when there is much coronavirus in the community, there will be severe cases among the vaccinated elderly and among unvaccinated middle-aged and elderly people."

"It will be the dominant strain in this country and all over Europe (and America) in the matter of a month or two," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Facebook Meta offers return to office delay
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-will-offer-office-deferral-program-for-employees-unready-to-return-11638920387?mod=hp_lista_pos3
GIST	<p>The parent company of Facebook said Tuesday it will fully reopen its U.S. offices at the end of January, but will give workers a chance to delay their scheduled return as late as June.</p> <p>Meta Platforms Inc.'s new "office deferral program" is designed to give employees flexibility in coming back to offices and determining how they work, a spokesman said. The company previously offered most of its employees the option to work remotely full-time.</p> <p>The move by Meta comes at a time when many companies are rethinking return-to-office plans because of uncertainty about the Omicron variant and an uptick in Covid-19 cases. Companies including Ford Motor Co. and Alphabet Inc.'s Google have delayed required return-to-office dates in recent days, while others are moving ahead with existing plans.</p> <p>Many of Meta's U.S. offices, including its Menlo Park, Calif., headquarters, have reopened at a limited capacity in recent months. The office-deferral program, available to employees in the U.S. and Canada, is meant for staffers who want to put off an office return for three to five months, but who don't want to opt in to long-term remote work.</p>

Meta requires anyone working at its U.S. offices to be vaccinated against Covid-19. The company had more than 68,100 full-time employees world-wide as of Sept. 30, and about half of its workforce is based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“For those wishing to return in January we look forward to providing a vibrant office experience that continues to prioritize health and safety. We also recognize that some aren’t quite ready to come back,” Janelle Gale, a vice president of human resources at Meta, said.

Ride-hailing company [Lyft](#) Inc. also said on Tuesday that it was adjusting plans and would no longer require its staff to return to the office in February. Offices are open for those wanting to work there, the company said, though employees will have the option to continue working remotely throughout next year.

Across industries, corporate executives [have questioned for months](#) how to handle return-to-office timelines, and the new variant has added uncertainty to those plans. [The Hartford Financial Services Group](#) Inc. had planned for its senior leaders to return to its Connecticut office on Monday, but said last week that those employees would remain remote for now out of an abundance of caution as scientists work to understand the variant’s transmissibility and vaccine effectiveness. A spokesman said the company will set a new date for senior leaders to return, and is moving forward with plans to bring employees back to the office on Jan. 18.

[Dell Technologies](#) Inc. told employees last week that it plans to begin reopening its remaining offices after Jan. 4. In a note to employees, Jenn Saavedra, Dell’s human-resources chief, said the company continued to monitor the variant and added that it still plans to offer flexible working arrangements. “Those whose work allows it—and who choose to do so—may continue to work virtually,” Ms. Saavedra said in the memo. “And as we move forward, we know one approach won’t work for all.”

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HEADLINE	12/07 Traffic in cities rising still below 2019 level
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/traffic-in-cities-is-rising-but-still-largely-below-pre-pandemic-levels-11638873000?mod=hp_listb_pos2
GIST	<p>Traffic congestion around the U.S. is creeping back up but remains lighter than before the pandemic, according to a new analysis, a result of many workers not yet returning to the office full time despite many officials’ efforts to get people back into core business districts.</p> <p>On average, U.S. commuters are on pace to lose 36 hours to congestion in 2021, 10 hours more than in 2020 but 63 hours less than in 2019, transportation analytics firm Inrix said in its 2021 Global Traffic Scorecard, released Tuesday. The analysis is based on data through October.</p> <p>Commuting is still less time consuming in all but one of the 25 most-congested cities compared with 2019. Drivers in Las Vegas, site of a major interstate repair project, have lost more time to backups this year. Congestion dropoffs from prepandemic levels vary in other cities, from 19% in Miami to 65% in Washington, D.C.</p> <p>“It’s very localized,” said Bob Pishue, a transportation analyst with Kirkland, Wash.-based Inrix. “Some of these areas with fewer restrictions, and destination-based places like Vegas and Miami, are seeing a little bit more congestion relative to where they were.”</p> <p>In many cities, certain roads have reached pre-Covid-19 traffic levels during rush hour, especially in the evening, Mr. Pishue said. One difference now is the duration is usually shorter. Also, morning commutes tend to be speedier than before, he said, reflecting a shift in driving patterns with many people still working from home and taking nonwork trips in the afternoon.</p> <p>Inrix collects billions of anonymous data points every day from sources like mobile devices, navigation units and publicly available information on incidents. Commute times are calculated by looking at the time</p>

it takes to travel between major employment centers and surrounding commuting neighborhoods. Total time lost is the difference in travel times during the peak periods compared with free-flow conditions.

The decrease in congestion doesn't mean roads are free-flowing. Boston's congestion is about half of 2019 levels, yet drivers will still lose 78 hours to traffic snarls this year—more than in oft-congested Seattle before the pandemic, according to Inrix. Only three U.S. cities fare worse than Boston in the 2021 congestion scorecard: Chicago, New York and Philadelphia.

Drivers may lament increasing congestion, Mr. Pishue said, “but really what we’re looking at this in terms of is getting back to normal.”

Las Vegas vaulted from the 89th most congested city last year to 22nd this year in Inrix's ranking, and commuters there are set to lose 28 hours, up from 16 in 2019. Much of the city's traffic increase is because of an influx of California visitors and workday jams on Interstate 515, where a viaduct is being repaired, said Theresa Gaisser, traffic operations director at the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada.

“We love tourism,” she said. “We’re excited to see the volumes are increasing, and that may entail some congestion on certain travel days.”

In Washington, commuting drivers are on track this year to lose 44 hours to congestion, down from 124 in 2019, Inrix found. Average rush-hour speeds on area interstates have fallen since January but remain higher than before the pandemic, according to data analyzed by the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board, the region's federally-designated metropolitan planning organization.

Mr. Pishue said a key factor has been the ability of so many D.C. area workers to telecommute, given the high concentration of government and contractor jobs. About half of the region's jobs are remote-capable, behind only San Francisco among peer metros, according to a February report by Ernst & Young for the business group Greater Washington Partnership.

A shift to telework could yield congestion dividends well after the pandemic eases, said Joe McAndrew, the partnership's vice president for regional mobility and infrastructure. “That's a huge success and an opportunity for us long-term,” he said. Congestion wastes time, harms the environment and limits the talent pool employers can draw from, he said.

Two-thirds of telecommuters in the region said they would prefer to work remotely part-time after the pandemic, while a quarter said they would like to do so full time, according to a 2020 survey by Washington's regional transportation planning board.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Return Black-owned land movement
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/06/return-black-owned-land-movement/
GIST	<p>MANHATTAN BEACH, Calif. — A Black family's successful fight to reclaim a picturesque stretch of Southern California shoreline has ignited a national movement, with activists eyeing White-owned properties around the country they say rightfully belong to African Americans.</p> <p>A landmark law signed by California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) on Sept. 30 provided for a seaside park in Manhattan Beach to be returned to the Bruce family, which owned the land before the city used eminent domain to seize it in 1924. The victory was hailed as a watershed moment, the first example of Black people forcing the return of property that was taken from them by one means or another, often violently, over the years.</p> <p>At the same time it raised a question: Would the Bruce's Beach case be a one-off, or a tipping point in a national struggle over Black land ownership? Activists and scholars say there are other similar cases nationwide, but proving them — and getting the current property owners to cooperate — will be a</p>

different matter, forcing another chapter in the nation's racial reckoning and raising thorny questions about how to right past wrongs.

"The reason it's getting so much attention now is there's been a precedent set and that's what's giving hope to other families," said Kavon Ward, who helped lead the successful fight on behalf of the Bruce family and has co-founded a group called Where Is My Land aimed at advocating for other Black people who are trying to reclaim lost and stolen land. "This is just the beginning."

Ward said she has already heard from more than 100 people eager to make the case that they have a rightful claim to property now occupied by others. Her group is turning its attention to a tract of land in Cleveland now partly owned by the Cleveland Clinic that activists say rightfully belongs to former businessman Winston E. Willis. As with the Bruce case in California, advocates say, Willis was deprived not just of his property but also of decades of potential prosperity — a scenario that, repeated many times over, lies at the root of the wealth gap between Whites and African Americans.

But the Cleveland case, along with many others, may be difficult to press to a successful conclusion, experts said.

Bruce's Beach offered a clear-cut case where a family's historical claim to a property was well documented. The spot in question was once home to a thriving African American resort owned by Charles and Willa Bruce, who endured years of harassment from White neighbors — including threats and intimidation from the Ku Klux Klan — before the city of Manhattan Beach used eminent domain to oust them entirely. The Bruces were paid a pittance and told a park would be built on the site, but the property lay vacant until it was transferred to the state in 1948, and subsequently to Los Angeles County.

In recent years that history has gotten more attention, and after Ward formed the group Justice for Bruce's Beach in 2020, a county supervisor took an interest in the case, as did state officials. It still took months of advocacy to get the land back for the Bruce family, and even required a change in state law to allow L.A. County to move forward with the land transfer.

Few other cases will be so straightforward, said William A. Darity Jr., a scholar at Duke University who co-authored a book on reparations published last year.

"I just think there are thousands of these cases, and a very small percentage of them have the degree of specificity that the Bruce Beach case does where you know exactly who owned the property, how it was taken and by whom," Darity said.

Darity pointed to examples such as the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, where White mobs destroyed a Black business district, killing and injuring hundreds of residents and displacing many more. It would be extremely difficult to untangle how all the properties in question changed hands, Darity said. Determining how to get the current owners to return the properties or pay compensation would create even more hurdles.

Still, the developments at Bruce's Beach have given hope to Aundra Willis Carrasco, whose brother Winston is 82 and residing at an assisted-living facility in Cleveland as his sister works to publicize his case. According to Willis Carrasco, Winston Willis owned multiple thriving businesses around 105th Street and Euclid Avenue in Cleveland beginning in 1968, before being forced out through a combination of illegal and fraudulent tactics by private developers and city officials and judges who conspired with them. The world-renowned Cleveland Clinic now occupies much of that prime real estate.

"It should be surrounded by the yellow tape they use in law enforcement because 105th and Euclid is the scene of a crime," Willis Carrasco said in an interview. "They never paid him for it, and it was taken from him illegally."

A spokeswoman for the Cleveland Clinic said it had no information, while a city spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment.

Ward said Where Is My Land was considering several possible paths for moving forward with the Willis case in Cleveland but declined to discuss them publicly at this point.

Elsewhere, too, African Americans and their advocates are pressing communities to reckon with and reconcile a history of housing policies that have disproportionately harmed Black Americans. Black people are far less likely than Whites to own land and homes and the generational wealth that goes with them, and the situation has shown little sign of improvement. Black homeownership rates are hovering at their lowest levels since the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, reaching 46.4 percent in the first quarter of this year compared to 75.8 percent of White families, according to census data.

“This is an important social movement that is challenging this nation to really, really think about how to right these historic wrongs,” said Emmitt Y. Riley III, associate professor of Africana studies and political science at DePauw University. “I think this starts the conversation, because no one I think can reasonably conclude that in a country that has been organized around racial inequality, that somehow Blacks were not exploited for their property.”

Riley and others questioned whether White Americans are ready to confront the issue in a serious way, even after George Floyd’s murder in 2020 and the growing public awareness of the nation’s history of racism in policing tactics and other policies.

In some cases, though, elected officials are responding to some degree.

In Minneapolis, lawmakers have passed the Minneapolis 2040 Plan, ambitious housing legislation that includes “Freeway Remediation,” a provision that acknowledges the “disparate impact” freeway construction in the city historically has had on communities of color. The plan calls for compensating Black families and descendants affected by the razing of communities of color to build highways. Similarly, officials in Lansing, Mich., are exploring the impact of Interstate 496 on the communities razed to construct it.

Meanwhile, housing advocacy groups in some cities, including Los Angeles, Seattle and Boston, have launched mapping projects that trace the history of racial covenants in their cities. The legal language — which typically restricted selling a home to anyone who wasn’t White — was used in cities across the United States to keep neighborhoods segregated.

Housing advocates are also targeting the harmful effects of redlining, the practice in which banks declined to lend in certain areas, often lower-income and minority neighborhoods. In Minneapolis, for example, homes in formerly redlined areas underperform the city’s \$266,500 median assessed value by 25 percent, according to data from the Mapping Prejudice Project.

After the attention garnered by the Bruce family’s experience, California set up a task force to study and recommend reparations for African Americans. The two-year process is meant to address the harms of slavery and systemic racism, according to the California governor’s office.

The Bruce family, meanwhile, has chosen for now to lease its property in Manhattan Beach back to Los Angeles County, though terms have not been made public. The property is occupied by a small grassy park and a lifeguard station, and on a recent morning the scene was idyllic as surfers waded into waves of the Pacific and children played in the park. A plaque at the site includes some of the history of the Bruce family.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn said the economic harm done by seizing the land in the 1920s is practically incalculable.

Hahn pointed to Manhattan Beach’s affluence today. The median price of a home in the town of 35,000 residents — where African Americans make up less than 1 percent of the population — reached a record \$2.9 million in August.

	<p>“It’s not an exaggeration to say that they would have been millionaires if they had been able to hold on to their property and their successful business,” Hahn said. “This was an injustice inflicted not just upon Willa and Charles Bruce, but on generations of their descendants.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Biden, Putin hold 2-hour virtual summit
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/us/politics/biden-putin-ukraine-summit.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden warned President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia on Tuesday that an invasion of Ukraine would result in heavy economic penalties for him and lead NATO to reposition its troops in Europe, measures that he said would go well beyond the West’s response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea seven years ago.</p> <p>In a two-hour, secure video conference that American and Russian officials both described as tense but occasionally pierced by humor, Mr. Biden also said an invasion could end Russia’s hopes of completing the Nord Stream II gas pipeline to Europe, which would be a major new source of energy revenue.</p> <p>It is too early to tell whether the much-anticipated conversation, whose details were hard to elicit as both the White House and the Kremlin put their spin on it, will alleviate the immediate crisis in Ukraine, where roughly 70,000 Russian troops have massed, with more equipment and personnel arriving every day.</p> <p>Mr. Putin gave no indication of his ultimate intent, American officials said, leaving the world guessing whether he was actually planning an invasion early next year, or trying to get the West to pay attention to his demands by manufacturing a crisis.</p> <p>In a brief video of the opening moments of the call released by Russian state television, Mr. Putin said, “Greetings, Mr. President!”</p> <p>“Good to see you again,” Mr. Biden responded warmly, after what appeared to be a brief connection glitch. He lamented that they had not seen each other in person this fall at the Group of 20 summit meeting. But neither side released any video of conversation on the issues at hand.</p> <p>Not surprisingly, both sides portrayed their leaders as resolute. Jake Sullivan, Mr. Biden’s national security adviser, said the president was “clear,” “direct” and “candid.”</p> <p>The Russian government, in an unusually detailed description of the encounter, said Mr. Putin had warned Mr. Biden that Western military activity in and around Ukraine was approaching a “red line” threatening Russia’s security.</p> <p>“There was no finger-wagging, but the president was crystal clear,” Mr. Sullivan told reporters after the session, which Mr. Biden conducted from the White House Situation Room, and Mr. Putin from his retreat on the Black Sea. Asked for specifics about the consequences facing Russia, Mr. Sullivan declined to go into detail.</p> <p>“I will look you in the eye and tell you, as President Biden looked President Putin in the eye and told him today, that things we did not do in 2014, we are prepared to do now,” Mr. Sullivan said, referring to the year Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Virtually no country has recognized the action, and Western powers continue to levy sanctions against Russia for it. But the sanctions have failed in their primary objective: to create enough pain for Russia that it returns the territory.</p> <p>In recent days, American officials have said that a list of potential penalties being compiled by the Treasury Department, in collaboration with European allies, ranges from blocking Russian companies from access to global capital markets to financial penalties aimed at the Russian elite, especially the oligarchs who have helped finance and support Mr. Putin.</p>

The most extreme step — one that is still being debated — would be to cut Russia off from the global financial settlement system, called SWIFT, but some European officials have feared that step might provoke too harsh a response.

Mr. Sullivan also held out the possibility of “an alternative pathway by which we can make progress on diplomacy,” describing what would be, in essence, a return to a diplomatic process Russia engaged in six years ago — but has largely ignored since.

Russian officials said the tone of the call was “honest and businesslike.” But Mr. Putin’s key message, the Kremlin maintained, was that Western military activity was a threat to Russia, and that the United States was raising tensions in the region by increasing its “military potential near our borders.”

What Mr. Putin sees as a red line, Ukraine and the West see as reasonable defense for a country that already lost control of Crimea — still “occupied territory” in the United States’ description — and has been engaged in a war of attrition in Donbas, in the east.

Since the Crimea takeover, the United States has committed more than \$2.5 billion in security assistance, including air surveillance radars, counterartillery radars, drones, secure communications, armed patrol boats and, most importantly, Javelin anti-tank systems. The last of those have worried Russian military leaders enough that some of the tanks seen massing on the borders are sporting new deflectors, like a metal umbrella, to deceive the missile’s homing systems.

The summit had the feel of a return to the East-West politics of the Cold War, when NATO strategy was focused on how to halt an invasion from the former Soviet Union, and Moscow was seeking respect and deference. But at stake was the continued independence of Ukraine, which won its independence after the fall of the Soviet Union, whose collapse Mr. Putin has described as a tragedy of 20th century geopolitics. And White House aides were highly aware that while their options were limited — there is no discussion of direct military involvement by the United States — a failure to deter Mr. Putin could be seen as a sign of weakness around the world, especially by China.

Mr. Putin speaks often about Ukraine’s historical and ethnic ties to Russia, saying they are “one people,” and finds Kyiv’s talk of eventual membership in NATO and the European Union both a security threat and an affront to his country’s national pride.

While the two men met, a senior State Department official, Victoria Nuland, warned the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Russian leader seemed emboldened.

“Much of this comes right out of Putin’s 2014 playbook, but this time, it is much larger, and on a much more lethal scale,” said Ms. Nuland, a Russia specialist who has angered Mr. Putin in the past. “So despite our uncertainty about exact intentions and timing, we must prepare with our allies and partners for all contingencies, even as we push Putin to reverse course.”

Ms. Nuland also suggested that Ukraine might be drawing closer to the point of employing defensive Javelin anti-tank missiles that the United States had supplied to its military in recent years, but which had been kept in storage, partly for fear of antagonizing Mr. Putin.

“The Ukrainians are having to think differently about their own security, and in fact, some of the defensive lethal support that the U.S. has given Ukraine over the years they’ve had in storage containers, and I think we’ll now see them have to put that stuff out and be thinking very hard about their own civil defense,” Ms. Nuland said.

She also confirmed in the Senate hearing that Nord Stream was on the table, saying, “I think if President Putin moves on Ukraine, our expectation is that the pipeline will be suspended.”

Speaking to a Wall Street Journal forum on Tuesday, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken called the crisis “bigger even than Ukraine,” saying that not only is the fate of the former Soviet republic at stake, but also the larger principle that international borders should not be violated or redrawn by force.

The director of the C.I.A., William J. Burns, a former American ambassador to Russia, also spoke at the forum. He said Mr. Putin may conclude in the next few months — as the ground freezes in the marshy territory on the Russia-Ukraine border and Russia completes its military buildup — that the time is ripe for action.

Mr. Burns added that in Mr. Putin’s view, the major European allies are “distracted with the transition beyond Chancellor Merkel in Germany” and with France preparing for presidential elections next spring.

“He sees himself in a position of relative economic strength compared to where the Russian economy was a couple of years ago, with high energy prices and his eyes probably enhancing Russia leverage,” he said of Mr. Putin.

Mr. Biden’s task on Tuesday was to change that view, and use what little leverage he has — since it is clear to Mr. Putin that there is no circumstance in which American or NATO troops would directly enter any battle to defend Ukraine.

Tuesday’s summit came on the 80th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Mr. Biden brought up the shared sacrifice of the United States and the Soviet Union during their alliance of necessity in World War II.

But shared sacrifice was not the topic at hand.

When Mr. Biden raised the threat of new economic steps to isolate Moscow, an adviser to Mr. Putin, Yuri V. Ushakov, said the Russian leader diminished the importance of such steps, saying that “sanctions are not a new thing for Russia.” He made no promises to change the posture of Russian troops near the border, or to pull them back.

“The Russian troops are on their own territory,” Mr. Ushakov said, summarizing Mr. Putin’s message to Mr. Biden. “They don’t threaten anyone.”

Today, a senior U.S. defense department official said, there are 60,000 to 70,000 Russian troops on the border with Ukraine. American intelligence agencies say they expect that figure to grow to 175,000. The biggest test of whether the video meeting changed Mr. Putin’s mind will be whether that military buildup abates.

At the end of the meeting, Mr. Putin underlined that the stakes in the current crisis were higher for Russia than they were for the United States, his aide said. He was apparently talking geographically — since he considers Ukraine to be a rightful part of Russia — while Mr. Biden’s concern is that allowing Mr. Putin to redraw the post-Cold War lines will subject more than 40 million Ukrainians to control by an autocratic government.

Mr. Sullivan was vague about what diplomatic alternatives Mr. Biden offered, saying several times that he wanted to keep the talks confidential to allow the leaders room for negotiation. “They need to have that space,” he said.

But the initiatives appear to be a return to some variations on the Minsk accords, which provide a road map for resolving the territorial differences — a map that many Ukrainians don’t like and the Russians have not obeyed since they were signed in 2015.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Young people’s mental health worsens
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/07/world/covid-omicron-vaccine#teens-mental-health-murthy

The United States surgeon general on Tuesday warned that young people are facing “devastating” mental health effects as a result of the challenges experienced by their generation, including the coronavirus pandemic.

The message came as part of a rare public advisory from the nation’s top physician, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, [in a 53-page report](#) noting that the pandemic intensified mental health issues that were already widespread by the spring of 2020.

The report cited significant increases in self-reports of depression, anxiety and emergency-room visits for mental health challenges. In the United States, emergency room visits for suicide attempts rose 51 percent for adolescent girls in early 2021 as compared with the same period in 2019. The figure rose 4 percent for boys.

Globally, symptoms of anxiety and depression doubled during the pandemic, the report noted. But mental health issues were already on the rise in the United States, with emergency room visits related to depression, anxiety and related issues up 28 percent between 2011 and 2015.

The reasons are complex and not yet definitive. Adolescent brain chemistry and relationships with friends and family are important factors, the report noted, as is a fast-paced media culture, which can leave some young minds feeling helpless.

“Young people are bombarded with messages through the media and popular culture that erode their sense of self-worth — telling them they are not good-looking enough, popular enough, smart enough or rich enough,” Dr. Murthy wrote in the report. “That comes as progress on legitimate, and distressing, issues like climate change, income inequality, racial injustice, the opioid epidemic and gun violence feels too slow.”

The surgeon general’s advisory adds to a growing number of calls for attention and action around adolescent mental health. In October, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children’s Hospital Association joined to declare “a national emergency” in youth mental health.

Although blame for adolescent distress is often pinned on social media, the research suggests that screen time alone does not account for crisis. Rather, social media and other online activities act more to amplify an adolescent’s existing mental state, causing some to feel more distress and others to experience enhanced feelings of connection.

Bonnie Nagel, a pediatric neuropsychologist at Oregon Health & Science University who treats and studies adolescents, said that online interactions appear not to satisfy core needs for connection. [Recent research](#) she co-authored shows that loneliness is a key predictor in feelings of depression and suicidal ideation.

“I don’t think it is genuine human connection when talking to somebody with a fake façade online,” Dr. Nagel said.

At the same time, screen time may be displacing activities known to be vital to physical and mental health, including sleep, exercise and in-person activity, [research shows](#). The current generation of youth express heightened levels of loneliness — more than any other age group — despite spending countless hours connected over media.

Authorities and scientists widely acknowledge that there has been insufficient research into the underlying causes. Dr. Murthy’s advisory calls for more resources to be devoted to understanding and addressing mental health challenges, and it urges a greater appreciation of mental health as a key factor in overall health.

“This is a moment to demand change,” the report concludes.

HEADLINE	12/07 Report: vaccinated faring against omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/07/world/covid-omicron-vaccine#omicron-variant-pfizer-vaccine
GIST	<p>A report out of South Africa offered a first glimpse at how vaccinated people might fare against the fast-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Laboratory experiments found that Omicron seems to dull the power of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, but also hinted that people who have received a booster shot might be better protected.</p> <p>The study, published online on Tuesday, found that antibodies produced by vaccinated people were much less successful at keeping the Omicron variant from infecting cells than other forms of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Scientists said the results were somewhat worrisome, but no cause for panic. The data suggests that vaccinated people might be vulnerable to breakthrough infections with Omicron, which is spreading rapidly in South Africa and has appeared in dozens of countries around the world.</p> <p>But vaccines stimulate a wide-ranging immune response that involves more than just antibodies. So these experiments offer an incomplete picture of how well the vaccine protects against hospitalization or death from Omicron.</p> <p>“While I think there’s going to be a lot of infection, I’m not sure this is going to translate into systems collapsing,” Alex Sigal, a virologist at the Africa Health Research Institute in Durban, South Africa, who led the research, said in an interview. “My guess is that it’ll be under control.”</p> <p>Dr. Sigal and his colleagues worked at breakneck speed over the past two weeks to grow the virus and then test antibodies against it. “If I don’t die from the virus, I’ll die of exhaustion,” he said.</p> <p>Originally, Dr. Sigal feared that vaccines might not provide any protection at all. It was possible that the Omicron variant had evolved a new way of entering cells, which would have rendered antibodies from vaccines useless. “Then all our efforts would be trash,” he said.</p> <p>Fortunately, that proved not to be the case.</p> <p>Dr. Sigal and his colleagues used antibodies from six people who received the Pfizer vaccine without ever having had Covid-19. They also analyzed antibodies from six other people who had been infected before getting the Pfizer vaccine.</p> <p>The researchers found that the antibodies from all of the volunteers performed worse against Omicron than they did against an earlier version of the coronavirus. Overall, their antibodies’ potency against Omicron dropped dramatically, to about one-fortieth of the level seen when tested with an earlier version of the virus. That low level of antibodies may not protect against breakthrough Omicron infections.</p> <p>Theodora Hatzioannou, a virologist at Rockefeller University who was not involved in the research, said that number was not surprising. “It’s more or less what we expected,” she said.</p> <p>The results could help explain some high-profile superspreading events caused by Omicron. At an office Christmas party in Norway, the virus seems to have infected at least half of 120 vaccinated attendees.</p> <p>Dr. Sigal announced the results on Twitter Tuesday afternoon.</p> <p>His team found a distinct difference between the two sets of volunteers. The antibodies from the six uninfected vaccinated people were very weak against Omicron. But among the volunteers who had Covid-19 before vaccination, five out of six still produced fairly potent responses.</p>

One reason for the difference is that people who are vaccinated after an infection produce higher levels of antibodies than do people who were not infected.

Dr. Sigal said the experiments will not be able to say much about how well boosters protect against Omicron until researchers directly test antibodies from people who have received them. But he suspected that the increased level of antibodies would provide good protection. “The more you’ve got, the better you’ll be,” he said.

Kristian Andersen, an infectious disease researcher at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, Calif., who was not involved in the new study, agreed that booster shots were likely to help fend off the new variant.

“I expect boosters to restore better levels of protection,” he said. “And, importantly, early clinical data from South Africa suggest that immunity — whether from vaccines or prior infections — is still effective in preventing the more severe forms of Covid-19.”

Dr. Hatzioannou was less certain about boosters. She and her colleagues are running experiments on antibodies from boosters to test whether they will produce the same robust protection seen in people who got vaccines after infection. “I want to say yes, but we have to wait,” she said.

Pfizer and Moderna have said that they were testing their vaccines against Omicron, and that they would be able to produce vaccines specifically tailored to the variant in roughly three months.

Jesse Bloom, a virologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, said that the study reinforced the need to accelerate the development of Omicron-specific shots. Even though there remains some uncertainty about how widely the variant will spread, he said, the best way of restoring protection against Omicron will be to give people a vaccine containing Omicron’s genetic information.

“Given the very large drop in neutralizing antibody titers that are seen here with Omicron,” he said, “certainly in my view it would merit pushing forward as fast as possible with making Omicron-specific vaccines, as long as it seems like there’s a possibility it could spread widely.”

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HEADLINE	12/07 Courts ruling on vaccine mandates
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/07/world/covid-omicron-vaccine#heres-the-latest-on-what-courts-have-said-about-bidens-vaccine-mandates
GIST	<p>All three of President Biden’s broad vaccine mandates affecting the private sector have been put on hold by courts.</p> <p>The Biden administration issued three mandates in September — one for federal contractors, another for healthcare workers, and a third for companies with more than 100 employees. Some Republican governors have argued that Mr. Biden does not have the authority to impose these mandates, which are estimated to cover more than 100 million workers.</p> <p>And federal judges in Georgia, Louisiana and Missouri — all appointed by Republicans — have agreed in part, creating a roadblock for the administration’s push to vaccinate all Americans. Before the court orders, local and private mandates had helped boost vaccination rates.</p> <p>Here’s where the court cases stand:</p> <p>Federal contractors</p> <p>A federal judge in Southern Georgia on Tuesday blocked the vaccine mandate for employees of federal contractors.</p>

U.S. District Court Judge for the Southern District of Georgia R. Stanley Baker — appointed by President Donald J. Trump — issued a preliminary nationwide injunction saying that he is “unconvinced” that the administration has the authority to impose the vaccine rules for contractors. The judge also argued that the mandate would “have a major impact on the economy at large.”

The order was in response to a lawsuit brought by the attorneys general of Georgia, Alabama, Idaho, Kansas, South Carolina, Utah and West Virginia.

Health care workers

A Trump-appointed federal judge in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Louisiana [issued a nationwide preliminary injunction](#) last week to halt the start of Mr. Biden’s national vaccine mandate for health care workers.

The injunction, written by Judge Terry A. Doughty appointed by Mr. Trump, [effectively expanded](#) a separate order issued by a federal court in Missouri by another Trump-appointed judge, Matthew Thomas Schelp. The earlier order [had applied only to 10 states](#).

Congress should make the mandate, not a government agency, Judge Doughty wrote.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services [appealed both rulings](#).

Large Businesses

Employers and governors in mostly Republican states have opposed Mr. Biden’s mandate that employees of large companies must be vaccinated or get tested weekly, [arguing that it was overreach](#) with various lawsuits.

A panel of three Republican appointed judges on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans has blocked the mandate nationwide multiple times, declaring that the rule “grossly exceeds” the authority of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

In [a filing asking the Fifth Circuit to withdraw its stay](#), the Justice Department argued that requiring large employers to force their workers to get vaccinated was within their administrative reach.

The ruling by the panel of the Fifth Circuit is unlikely to be the final word. Some [challenges to the mandate are in other circuits](#), and the Supreme Court is expected to eventually decide the matter.

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HEADLINE	12/08 New political era transitions in Germany
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/08/world/germany-scholz-merkel#after-a-harmonious-transition-for-merkels-successor-now-comes-the-difficult-part
GIST	<p>A dominant era of German politics is ending on Wednesday as Angela Merkel hands over the chancellery to her successor, opening a new chapter for Europe’s biggest democracy.</p> <p>For the first time in 16 years, Germany will have a center-left government led by a new chancellor. And that leader, Olaf Scholz, finds himself in the difficult spot of trying to live up to the high expectations set by Ms. Merkel, under whose stewardship Germany became Europe’s leading power for the first time in modern history.</p> <p>For over a decade, Ms. Merkel steered her country and the continent through a series of crises. She leaves power after a drawn-out goodbye — she announced in 2018 that she would not seek re-election — and as the most popular politician in her nation.</p> <p>Mr. Scholz, a Social Democrat with ambitions to revive progressive politics across Europe, is set to be sworn in on Wednesday afternoon as Germany’s ninth postwar chancellor.</p>

Unlike his predecessors, Germany's new chancellor will not enjoy a grace period. Several pressing crises demand his immediate attention, chief among them a [pandemic that continues to spiral](#) and the risk of a [looming conflict with Russia on the Ukrainian border](#). Going forward, he will also have to maintain European cohesion in the continuing wake of Britain's departure from the European Union, and contend with Washington, an ally that has grown less dependable in recent years.

How much of a change Mr. Scholz's coalition government with the progressive Greens and the business-friendly Free Democrats will prove to be is unclear. The Social Democrats governed with Ms. Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats for three of her four terms, and Mr. Scholz himself was her finance minister for the past four years, prompting many to expect a degree of continuity.

The transition of power formally taking place on Wednesday was in many ways set in motion when the country held elections in September. Ms. Merkel invited Mr. Scholz to accompany her to a [Group of 20 meeting in Rome](#) in October to introduce him to leaders like President Biden. And last week the incoming and departing chancellors jointly presided over a coronavirus emergency meeting with the governors of Germany's 16 states.

"The transition from Merkel to Scholz is so harmonious that you've got to ask: What is it between those two?" the newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung posited in a [recent article](#).

During a military farewell ceremony for Ms. Merkel last week, she wished Mr. Scholz — whom she called "Dear Olaf" — "all the best, a lucky hand and much success." He promptly replied with a [compliment of his own on Twitter](#): "Angela Merkel was a successful chancellor," he said. "She tirelessly stood up for her country and during 16 years in which a lot changed, stayed true to herself."

So far at least, the transition has been so harmonious that Germans said they were proud of it.

"We are witnessing a very good democratic transition where there is a basic consensus," said Christoph Heusgen, Ms. Merkel's former chief foreign policy adviser, who this week took over the presidency of the Munich Security Conference. "I am a little proud of our democracy the way it's managed this transition without schadenfreude, without hatred, without malice."

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HEADLINE	12/07 National Guard troops train Ukraine military
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/7/florida-national-guard-troops-train-ukraines-milit/
GIST	<p>A brigade of Army soldiers from the Florida National Guard has been in Ukraine for about a week on a training mission, even as Russian forces continue massing on the border and both countries' political leaders try to lower tensions.</p> <p>The troops, assigned to the 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, are advising and mentoring local forces as part of Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine.</p> <p>Known as Task Force Gator, they just took over the mission from the Washington National Guard's 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team.</p> <p>It makes the 11th rotation of U.S. forces into Ukraine since 2015, when the advisory missions first began, according to the Pentagon.</p> <p>The mission adjusts in size, scope, and scenario as Ukraine's armed forces progress through their development plan. Officials with the Defense Department said it's a "win-win" for soldiers from the U.S. and Ukraine. It gives the Americans valuable training opportunities and contributes to Kyiv's defensive capabilities.</p> <p>"Our ongoing training and support are designed to strengthen relationships and affirm U.S. commitment to the success of a stable and free Ukraine," Marine Corps Lt. Col. Anton T. Semelroth, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement.</p>

Citing security reasons, Pentagon officials declined to say how many U.S. troops are currently in Ukraine. An infantry brigade combat team has about 3,900 to 4,100 soldiers depending on how it is configured.

In addition to the Florida National Guard soldiers, personnel from Special Operations Command Europe play a large role in developing and mentoring Ukraine's special operations fighters through regular training exercises, Pentagon officials said.

The U.S. has committed more than \$2.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since 2014. But the National Guard troops will not engage in ground combat while in Ukraine, officials said.

"We remain committed to strengthening our strategic defense partnership with Ukraine, including through the provision of security assistance," Lt. Col. Semelroth said.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Govt. recognizes immigration judges union
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/07/us-immigration-judges-union-biden-administration
GIST	<p>In a stunning victory, US immigration judges have settled a tense dispute with Joe Biden's administration over their effort to restore union rights taken away from them under Donald Trump.</p> <p>Biden's Department of Justice agreed on Tuesday to recognize the union as the exclusive representative for the nation's immigration judges and follow the terms of their collective bargaining agreement, at least for the time being.</p> <p>Days before reaching the settlement, the head of the federal immigration judges' union had accused the Biden administration of "doubling down" on its predecessor's efforts to freeze out their association even as they struggle with a backlog of almost 1.5m court cases and staff shortages, which exacerbate due process concerns in their courts.</p> <p>Mimi Tsankov, president of the National Association of Immigration Judges (NAIJ), had declared herself "mystified" that Biden's Department of Justice would not negotiate with her members despite the US president vocally and frequently touting his support for workers' representation.</p> <p>"This administration has really doubled down on maintaining the [Trump] position that we are not a valid union," Tsankov said before the settlement.</p> <p>Tsankov was appointed as an immigration judge in 2006 and is based in New York, where she also teaches at Fordham University School of Law. She spoke to the Guardian only in her union role.</p> <p>After what she described as "decades" of relatively smooth relations between the NAIJ and the Department of Justice, Donald Trump capped four years of rightwing immigration policy by successfully petitioning to strip hundreds of immigration judges of their right to unionize.</p> <p>The hostile move was decided by the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA), an independent administrative federal agency that controls labor relations between the federal government and its employees, on 2 November 2020, the day before the presidential election.</p> <p>Despite a Democratic victory and Joe Biden taking the White House pledging to undo damage done by Trump, the union remained shut out and silenced for more than a year, without a date set to hear its case attempting to restore its official status.</p> <p>"I cannot understand it ... Working together, as the president has stated, working with federal employees, working with unions, achieves better results," said Tsankov.</p>

The justice department did [clear the way](#) in June for the judges' union to at least ask for its rights back when the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) – home to the country's immigration courts – withdrew opposition to the NAIJ's [motion for reconsideration](#).

However, Tsankov said the administration had still been refusing to negotiate, which led the NAIJ to accuse the EOIR of unfair labor practices.

The complaint in question accused EOIR of “interfering with, restraining and coercing employees in the exercise of their rights” to organize and “refusing to negotiate in good faith”.

She said in a phone interview last week: “Good faith, in my mind, would have said, if we really cared about this union, this administration would have started negotiating with us. But they haven't, so we're really mystified as to why.

“I don't think there's any other way to say it ... They have simply doubled down on this policy, and it is counterintuitive given the positions that the president has set forth,” she said.

In a formal response to the complaint, EOIR stated that “in essence, the NAIJ is defunct”.

Administration officials went so far as to file a motion to dismiss the NAIJ's grievances about unfair labor practices, though the motion was denied.

But on Tuesday, the administration changed its tune, agreeing to recognize the union and make other concessions in exchange for the NAIJ withdrawing its charges of unfair labor practices.

The administration will continue to recognize the union unless the FLRA denies the motion for reconsideration.

EOIR does not comment on continuing litigation.

Even with the conflict reaching a detente, the nation's immigration courts are still tackling crushing case loads with severe shortages of vital personnel such as legal assistants and translators.

Tsankov said one of the New York immigration courts only had about 30% of the staff it needs, and other courts in cities as geographically diverse as Memphis, Salt Lake City and Philadelphia have been short-staffed for years.

The lack of personnel makes it more difficult for judges to be fully prepared for hearings and can even affect whether those in front of the courts, often including migrants [at the US-Mexico border](#), receive adequate notice of important changes to their cases.

She suggested that shifting political priorities between administrations might have focused resources on law enforcement instead of hiring more staff to make the immigration courts run more efficiently.

“It has a very real impact on the ability of respondents who are seeking justice ... to ensure that they're receiving a fair hearing,” said Tsankov.

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HEADLINE	12/08 SKorea new virus cases surge sparks alarm
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/south-korea-hospitals-under-pressure-as-record-7175-covid-cases-in-a-day
GIST	South Korea has reported a record daily total of 7,175 new Covid cases as officials urged people to complete their vaccinations.

The prime minister, Kim Boo-kyum, warned that hospitals were coming under intense pressure amid a rise in serious cases, days after the government announced a return to stricter restrictions on social gatherings. The total caseload rose to 489,484 on Wednesday, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency. That was a rise of 2,221 from a day earlier, the biggest daily jump since the start of the pandemic.

The number of critically ill patients also rose to a record high of 840, up 66 from a day early, while the death toll increased by 63 to 4,020, the agency said. People aged over 60 account for 35% of the total caseload and 84% of critically ill patients, including those whose immunities have waned since receiving their first two vaccine doses early this year.

Kim said the government would increase the number of hospital beds in the Seoul area, where 80% of infections were reported, but conceded that it would be “tough to catch up with the pace of rising cases”.

It would also mobilise more medical personnel to monitor patients with mild symptoms who are treating themselves at home and speed up hospital transfers among those who develop severe symptoms, Kim told a virus response meeting. Private clinics would be enlisted to treat Covid patients to ease the pressure on large hospitals, he added.

The recent surge, in a country that had been relatively successful in keeping infections and deaths to a minimum, is being attributed to young people who have yet to be fully vaccinated and older citizens who have not received boosters.

Having kept the virus in check for much of the pandemic, South Korea has had, on average, more than 5,000 new cases a day for the past week. It has identified 38 cases of the Omicron variant.

In response, the government introduced stricter social distancing and other measures on Monday that will remain in place until early January, the Yonhap news agency said – a move that came just weeks after it eased measures as part of its “living with Covid-19” approach.

Private gatherings will be limited to a maximum of six people in the Seoul area and to eight outside the capital. The numbers had previously been capped at 10 and 12.

In addition, people wishing to access “high-risk” venues such as pubs, saunas and gyms will have to show proof of full vaccination or a negative coronavirus test.

Kim acknowledged that the measures would create anxiety among small business owners, but added: “We know from experience that if virus prevention falters, then so do people’s lives.”

Although 80.7% of South Korea’s 52 million population have been double jabbed, younger people are being urged to complete their vaccinations after the education ministry reported this week that almost all of the children and young people diagnosed with Covid-19 over the previous fortnight had not received their second dose. Only 8.8% of the population has had a booster dose, Yonhap said.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Hawaii gov. declares state of emergency
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/07/hawaii-floods-state-emergency/
GIST	<p>Hawaii is threatened by heavy rains that are likely to last at least two more days and damage life, infrastructure and property throughout the state, Gov. David Ige (D) said as he declared a state of emergency on Monday.</p> <p>“Hawaii is in danger of a disaster occurrence of heavy rains, flooding, high winds, and high surf which are forecast to continue through December 8, 2021,” the governor’s emergency declaration reads, “with anticipated localized flooding, lingering saturated ground conditions, and periods of heavy rains and flooding which are expected to cause extensive damage.”</p>

The governor's declaration, which is set to remain in effect through Friday, will allow authorities to allocate funding, temporarily suspend laws that could interfere with emergency management efforts, and take action to save lives, including by ordering mandatory evacuations and shutting off power lines.

In its [latest forecast discussion](#), issued after midnight local time on Tuesday, the National Weather Service said the Kona storm — a subtropical cyclone that occurs during the cool season — would “bring the threat of heavy rain and locally gusty winds to Kauai County and Oahu,” where a flood watch remains in effect.

However, it added that “the threat of significant flooding” appeared to have diminished on the Big Island and in Maui County and that a “breezy and drier trade wind weather pattern will spread over all islands by Thursday, continuing into the weekend.”

On Monday, Honolulu firefighters rescued several people trapped or swept away by floodwaters, including children and an elderly woman, according to [Hawaii Now](#).

The city experienced severe power outages after a substation serving the downtown area flooded, electrical services company [Hawaiian Electric said](#), adding that power would not be restored to the affected areas until Tuesday morning “at the earliest.” Parts of Maui were also asked to prepare for [prolonged outages](#).

Meanwhile, Maui's Kahului Airport was briefly without power Sunday, [disrupting normal service](#), and [sections of major highways](#) were shut down Monday because of flooding.

However, all public schools in Hawaii were [set to be open Tuesday](#) except for two on Oahu, the state Department of Education said.

Honolulu's mayor, [Rick Blangiardi](#), warned residents in a Facebook post on Monday evening: “Now is not a good time to go for a hike, or engage in risky behavior. Please make good choices to ensure our emergency services personnel don't need to endanger their lives in a rescue operation.”

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HEADLINE	12/07 Swiss again deploy army amid pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/swiss-again-deploy-army-help-cope-with-pandemic-2021-12-07/
GIST	<p>ZURICH, Dec 7 (Reuters) - Switzerland will deploy up to 2,500 military personnel to help regional authorities cope with the coronavirus pandemic, the government said on Tuesday, again tapping the armed forces to support the health care system as COVID-19 cases soar.</p> <p>Switzerland and tiny neighbour Liechtenstein have reported more than 1 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and nearly 11,300 deaths from the disease since the pandemic broke out last year.</p> <p>Cases have been rising again, straining some hospitals as the government tries to keep the economy open amid what it calls a "critical" situation.</p> <p>Last week, it tightened rules on wearing masks and producing a certificate to prove a person is vaccinated or has recovered from the virus.</p> <p>Switzerland, which used the military twice last year to help out, will let cantons request help to care for or transport patients and to support vaccinations if their civil defence, fire department and private-sector resources are inadequate.</p> <p>The government said it would ask parliament to approve the measure, that will run until March 31.</p> <p>Nearly 79% of hospital intensive care units are now occupied, of which COVID patients account for just over 30%.</p>

	Only 66% of the Swiss population - or three out of four people aged 12 or older - is fully vaccinated despite repeated public campaigns to encourage holdouts to get jabbed.
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HEADLINE	12/07 Union: growing hostility to law enforcement
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/7/national-police-union-leader-says-erosion-respect/
GIST	<p>A national police union leader says the uptick in shootings and ambush-style attacks targeting police this year is linked to growing hostility toward law enforcement.</p> <p>A report published last week by the National Fraternal Order of Police shows 314 officers had been shot in the line of duty through November — the most in the last three years, with another month to go.</p> <p>According to the union, 312 officers were shot in all of 2020, 293 were shot in 2019 and 237 in 2018.</p> <p>The report states that 58 of the officers shot this year have died. That’s up from 47 in 2020 and 50 in 2019.</p> <p>Union President Patrick Yoes says “the recent erosion of respect for law enforcement has fueled more aggression towards police officers than what has been seen in previous years.”</p> <p>“As violence continues to be aimed at law enforcement, our officers continue to show up every day to keep the communities they serve safe,” Mr. Yoes continued. “These men and women run toward danger to protect the public when everyone else is running away.”</p> <p>According to the FOP report, the majority of officers shot this year as of Nov. 30 worked in Texas (42), followed by Illinois (25); California (21); Florida (17) and Georgia (17) and Alabama (15), according to the report. Some states had no police shot, including: Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota and Vermont, as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. territories of Guam and the American Samoa.</p> <p>The report also states there have been 95 ambush-style attacks targeting police so far this year, which is 126% higher than the same time last year.</p> <p>Betsy Brantner Smith, spokeswoman for the National Police Association, told The Washington Times that the media and lawmakers are adding to recent anti-police sentiments.</p> <p>“It’s no secret that the unconscionable vilification of American law enforcement in the last 18 months by the media, activists, politicians and others has left much of the police profession short-handed, demoralized and sometimes hesitant to police proactively,” said Ms. Brantner Smith, a retired police sergeant.</p> <p>She added that the “Defund the Police” movement “has left many agencies lacking in training dollars just at a time when, as evidenced by the FOP’s alarming statistics, many police officers need more and better officer survival training.”</p> <p>The FOP president also called on Congress to pass the “Protect and Serve Act,” which would make it a federal crime to knowingly cause, or attempt to cause, injury to a police officer. It was introduced earlier this year by Senate Republicans.</p> <p>The law, he said, would “address the terrible violence targeting our law enforcement officers ... to better protect the brave men and women who wear the badge and send a clear message to those who would seek to do them harm.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 ‘Stealth’ version omicron variant identified
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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/scientists-find-stealth-version-of-omicron-not-identifiable-with-pcr-test-covid-variant
GIST	<p>Scientists have identified a “stealth” version of the Omicron variant which cannot be detected with the routine tests that public health officials are using to track its spread around the world.</p> <p>The stealth variant has many mutations in common with standard Omicron, but it lacks a particular genetic change that allows lab-based PCR tests to be used as a rough and ready means of flagging up probable cases.</p> <p>Researchers say it is too early to know whether the new form of Omicron will spread in the same way as the standard Omicron variant, but that the “stealthy” version is genetically distinct and so may well behave differently.</p> <p>The stealth variant was first spotted among Covid virus genomes submitted in recent days from South Africa, Australia and Canada, but the difficulty in detecting the variant means it may already have spread more widely. Among the few dozen cases identified so far, none are in the UK.</p> <p>The discovery came as the prime minister told the cabinet that Omicron appeared more transmissible and officials conceded this would have consequences for its impact, and the likelihood of further restrictions being needed.</p> <p>The UK Health Security Agency said a further 101 confirmed cases of the Omicron variant had been reported in the UK on Tuesday. This brings the total number of UK cases to 437. Of the 101 new cases, one was confirmed in Wales while there have been no new cases reported in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>At the cabinet meeting on Tuesday morning, also attended by the government’s chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, and England’s chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, Johnson told ministers the “early indications” were that Omicron was more transmissible than the existing dominant variant, Delta, a No 10 statement said.</p> <p>Johnson’s spokesperson said the next contingency step remained the potential imposition of the so-called plan B, which would introduce vaccine certification and instructions to work from home where possible.</p> <p>While the government would “want to make sure that parliament has its say” on any new rules, the spokesperson said, ministers had the existing powers to impose plan B restrictions unilaterally, for example if they were needed during the Commons Christmas recess.</p> <p>Despite such considerations, the spokesperson confirmed that for now, official advice remained that people should return to workplaces if they could, albeit with consideration of mitigations such as ventilation and testing. He said: “We are encouraging businesses to bring back people into the office, in line with the guidance.”</p> <p>The discovery of the new form of Omicron prompted researchers to split the B.1.1.529 lineage into standard Omicron, known as BA.1, and the newer variant, known as BA.2. Prof Francois Balloux, director of the University College London Genetics Institute, said that 42 or roughly 6% of the 709 Omicron genomes submitted to the Gisaid genome database were BA.2.</p> <p>“There are two lineages within Omicron, BA.1 and BA.2, that are quite differentiated genetically,” he said. “The two lineages may behave differently.”</p> <p>Scientists use whole genome analysis to confirm which variant has caused a Covid infection, but PCR tests can sometimes give an indication. About half of the PCR machines in the UK look for three genes in the virus, but Omicron (and the Alpha variant before it) test positive on only two of them. This is because Omicron, like Alpha, has a genetic change called a deletion in the “S” or spike gene. The glitch means that PCR tests that display so-called “S gene target failure” are highly suggestive of Omicron infections.</p>

Informally, some researchers are calling the new variant “stealth Omicron” because it lacks the deletion that allows PCR tests to spot it. A concern among some researchers is that the stealth variant could spread unnoticed while public health officials are focused on PCR tests for standard Omicron.

One major unknown is how the new variant emerged. While it falls under Omicron, it is so genetically distinct that it may qualify as a new “variant of concern” if it spreads rapidly. To have two variants, BA.1 and BA.2, arise in quick succession with shared mutations is “worrying” according to one researcher, and suggests public health surveillance “is missing a big piece of the puzzle”.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Omicron to be dominant strain in Europe
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-expected-to-be-dominant-strain-in-parts-of-europe-within-weeks-11638889781?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant of the coronavirus is weeks away from becoming the dominant strain in parts of Europe, government officials and scientists say, as authorities try to slow the spread of a variant that appears adept at seeding outbreaks among the vaccinated.</p> <p>Emerging evidence from the U.K., Norway and South Africa suggests, however, that vaccines offer significant protection against severe illness with Omicron, adding impetus to government efforts to broaden vaccination coverage and offer booster shots.</p> <p>Cases so far have overwhelmingly been mild. Officials in Norway say that is likely because so many of the infections have been in vaccinated people. Many cases are still only a few days old, however, and scientists say it is too soon to be sure whether the level of disease severity reported reflects some property of Omicron itself, or is a result of factors such as the protection afforded by vaccination or prior infection, or age.</p> <p>The variant has triggered border closures world-wide in the run-up to Christmas and sparked new anxiety over how soon the world will be able to put the pandemic behind it. The picture emerging from labs in South Africa, the focus of the Omicron outbreak, and increasingly from Europe is that the variant is likely more transmissible than previous versions of the virus and may be able to more easily sidestep the immunity from prior infection or vaccination. It displays dozens of mutations, some linked to faster spread and some whose properties are entirely unknown.</p> <p>The World Health Organization has designated Omicron a “variant of concern,” warranting much greater surveillance by national authorities. The Biden administration is preparing to fast-track authorization of revamped Covid-19 vaccines to combat Omicron, and has extended a requirement that travelers wear masks through mid-March on planes, buses and trains, and at domestic transportation hubs such as airports and indoor bus terminals, rather than allowing the requirement to expire on Jan. 18.</p> <p>The U.K. Health Security Agency said Tuesday it had recorded 437 confirmed cases of Omicron in Britain, less than two weeks after identifying the country’s first two cases. Francois Balloux, director of University College London’s Genetics Institute, and Neil Ferguson, professor of epidemiology at Imperial College, estimate the number of Omicron cases in the U.K. is currently doubling every three days. That suggests the variant could displace the dominant Delta strain as soon as next month, said Prof. Balloux.</p> <p>Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers on Monday that none of those infected needed hospital treatment, though that was prior to the latest uptick in cases.</p> <p>In Norway, 130 people who were at an upscale restaurant hosting a Nov. 26 company Christmas party have tested positive for Covid-19. About 30 of those cases are confirmed Omicron infections, authorities said Tuesday; the remainder are suspected of being so.</p> <p>That outbreak offered epidemiologists an early, if anecdotal, glimpse into how easily the variant spreads among the vaccinated. Eleven days in, however, none of them has been hospitalized, which Norwegian</p>

authorities chalked up to the fact that only vaccinated employees were allowed to attend the party. Several are feeling better, and are due to be released from isolation Tuesday or Wednesday, said Tine Ravlo, the chief physician for Oslo's Frogner district.

"They're feeling OK," she said. The remainder have mild symptoms, like a cough, fever or a runny nose.

Still, Norway's government has tightened restrictions, which its disease-control agency, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, said Tuesday would be necessary until a clearer picture develops. Hospitals have already been under pressure from mainly unvaccinated patients, and from sick health workers having to take days off. Omicron could potentially worsen that burden, authorities said, and the variant is expected to become Norway's dominant strain by January at the latest.

Meanwhile, Norway on Tuesday said it had reduced the waiting time for booster shots, and began offering them to more age groups and professions. A panel of scientists advising the U.K. government on vaccine policy recently recommended the booster shots be offered to all adults.

"The Omicron variant is unlikely to cause more serious disease in vaccinated people," the Norwegian Institute of Public Health said Tuesday. "Vaccination will provide a high degree of protection."

Denmark has traced clusters of Omicron cases to two large events on Nov. 27: a Christmas lunch for 150 people in Viborg and a concert attended by around 2,000 people in Aalborg.

Sixty-four attendees of the lunch have tested positive for Omicron, a spokeswoman for the Danish Patient Safety Authority said. Ten of the concert attendees have been confirmed infected with the variant. The vaccination status of the Omicron cases isn't clear, though Denmark has vaccinated more than 75% of its population, according to data compiled by the University of Oxford's Our World in Data project.

Scientists are working to figure out how the variant spreads so quickly. U.K. public-health authorities say they have found evidence that an infection can be passed on sooner than with earlier variants.

Martin Hibberd, professor of emerging infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said this gap was usually around six days for earlier versions of the virus, including Delta. Omicron can seemingly spread from a newly infected person to another host in as little as three days, he said.

"That would have a serious effect on the transmission scale," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Saudis seek missile defense resupply
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-pleads-for-missile-defense-resupply-as-its-arsenal-runs-low-11638878400?mod=hp_lead_pos13
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—Saudi Arabia is running out of the ammunition it uses to defend against weekly drone and missile attacks on its kingdom and is urgently appealing to the U.S. and its Gulf and European allies for a resupply, U.S. and Saudi officials said.</p> <p>Over the past several months, Saudi Arabia has been attacked by nearly a dozen ballistic missile and drone strikes launched each week by the Yemen-based Houthi rebels, U.S. and Saudi officials said. The Saudi military has successfully fended off most of the barrages with its Patriot surface-to-air missile system, but its arsenal of interceptors—missiles used to shoot down airborne weapons—has fallen dangerously low, these officials said.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the U.S. military has redeployed much of the American weaponry that defended U.S. forces and lent security to Saudi Arabia, part of the Biden administration's turn away from the Middle East to confront China.</p>

While U.S. officials appeared poised to formally approve the Saudi request, the situation has officials in Riyadh concerned that without a sufficient stock of Patriot interceptors, the sustained attacks could result in significant loss of life or damage to critical oil infrastructure. In January, the Houthis struck buildings belonging to the royal court, but no one was injured.

The Saudi government's appeal has tested the U.S. commitment to the Middle East and in particular to Riyadh, where the Biden administration has attempted to reshape the relationship over a range of issues including human rights, [the Saudi-led war in Yemen](#) and the October 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at [the hands of Saudi operatives at the Saudi consulate](#) in Istanbul.

In one indication of tension, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's planned visit to Riyadh in September was [abruptly canceled](#). He later told reporters that the kingdom had canceled the visit because of scheduling issues. Mr. Austin returned to the region last month but didn't travel to Saudi Arabia.

The number of attacks against the kingdom has grown significantly, according to a Saudi government official. Drones struck Saudi territory 29 times last month and 25 times in October; the country was struck by 11 ballistic missile attacks last month and 10 in October. That is up significantly from February 2020, when Saudi Arabia was attacked six times, five by ballistic missiles and once by a drone, according to the official.

Timothy Lenderking, the U.S. special envoy for Yemen, said at a forum on Friday that the Houthis have conducted about 375 cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia in 2021.

Saudi air defenses intercepted a ballistic missile above Riyadh on Monday. The Defense Ministry said it had produced shrapnel in several residential districts but caused no damage. Online videos showing a boom and flashes of light suggested a Patriot system had been engaged.

Despite their concerns about Saudi Arabia's human-rights record and other issues, U.S. officials believe they have an obligation to help the oil-rich kingdom in its own defense, especially as the U.S. grapples with rising oil prices. A [sophisticated attack in 2019](#) hit state-owned Aramco Oil facilities, forcing the brief suspension of some production. The Houthis [attacked a major Saudi oil port](#) in March but caused no damage.

The Saudis have been mostly successful at defending themselves, U.S. and Saudi officials say, defeating almost nine out of 10 missile or drone attacks, according to U.S. officials.

More missile interceptors won't address the longer-term budget problem: The interceptors cost about \$1 million a piece, but the drones, described by people familiar with them as "\$10,000 flying lawn mowers," are small, simply made and relatively inexpensive, officials and analysts said.

"Attacks by armed drones launched by terrorist militias are a relatively new global security threat and the means for dealing with them are evolving," the Saudi official said.

Saudi concerns about its security situation and its request to the U.S. government haven't been previously reported.

The Saudi government is requesting that the U.S. provide it with hundreds more Patriot interceptors manufactured by Raytheon Technologies Corp., and it has also approached Gulf allies, including Qatar, and European countries. A direct sale of the interceptors to Saudi Arabia is under consideration by the State Department, according to two U.S. officials, and the department would also be required to sign off on any transfers from another government like Qatar.

"The United States is fully committed to supporting Saudi Arabia's territorial defense, including against missiles and drones launched by Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen," said a senior administration official in a statement. "We are working closely with the Saudis and other partner countries to ensure there is no gap in coverage."

The State Department and Raytheon declined to comment.

In November, the State Department approved and Congress was notified of a sale for a system known as the Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles system, for about \$650 million. The Saudi government had requested to purchase 280 missiles and 596 missile-rail launchers to defend the kingdom against such attacks.

The Saudi-led conflict with the Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen has been grinding on for seven years. The Houthis, who control much of Yemen, including its capital, are battling a Saudi-backed, internationally recognized Yemeni government and have so far rebuffed peace overtures from Riyadh and Washington.

The U.S. has pressed the Saudis to end the war in Yemen, but Rep. Adam Smith (D., Wash.), the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who supports the push, says the resupply of the Patriot interceptors must be viewed separately from concerns over Saudi Arabia's conduct in Yemen and other issues that put it at odds with Washington.

"How do we deal with that threat while also trying to make the autocrats in that part of the world move in a more progressive direction?" Mr. Smith said. "It's not an easy formula."

Even fully stocked with interceptors, Riyadh remains vulnerable, because the Patriot missile system is designed to counter ballistic missiles, not small drones. The Patriot batteries can't swivel 360 degrees, for instance, limiting their effectiveness against the drones, which are sometimes launched from inside the kingdom, U.S. officials said. In at least one case, a drone flew into the rear of a Saudi Patriot missile battery, destroying it, officials said.

"The [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] is dealing with different types of rockets, ballistic missiles and UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles]," the Saudi official said in the statement. "The interception of each type requires different capabilities, and we are actively increasing and diversifying our systems so that we can counter these aerial projectiles."

The U.S. has no formal program to counter drone attacks and won't be able to transfer antidrone technology to the Saudi government any time soon, experts familiar with the development of counterdrone technology say.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Volunteer fighters raise stakes in Ethiopia
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/volunteer-fighters-raise-stakes-in-ethiopias-bitter-conflict-11638869586?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>They call it the citizens' army.</p> <p>Across Ethiopia, thousands of men and women are quitting their jobs to enlist with the country's armed forces, as rebels from the Tigray People's Liberation Front have threatened to invade the capital, fanning fears that a simmering conflict will spiral into full-blown civil war.</p> <p>Teachers, shopkeepers and students have swelled their ranks. Former soldiers have come out of retirement. Olympic long-distance legends Haile Gebrselassie and Feyisa Lilesa have thrown their support behind Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has been pictured directing the campaign against the TPLF from the front lines.</p> <p>"Saving my country is my highest priority right now," said Bilet Alamrew, who was a librarian at Debre Berhan University in the north of Ethiopia before joining a pro-government militia. "It is the main reason I left my job to join the army."</p>

It is a similar situation across the rebel lines. Ethnic Tigrayans have flocked to join the TPLF after government forces swept through the mountainous northern region earlier this year.

The influx of raw recruits on each side has many Ethiopians worrying that the conflict is about to enter a dangerous new phase. Untrained militias will likely be harder to control, potentially fanning ethnic strife, rights groups and security consultants say. A full-blown conflict risks repeating the turmoil that afflicted the country in the 1980s. The yearlong fighting has already displaced millions of people from their homes, with 400,000 living in famine-like conditions, the United Nations has warned.

“The blurring of lines between combatant and civilian increases the risk of human rights abuses and the difficulty in holding perpetrators to account,” said Edward Hobe-Hamsher, Africa analyst at risk consulting firm Verisk Maplecroft. “That this is happening in a country with deep ethnic cleavages is particularly ominous.”

The TPLF dominated Ethiopia’s government for decades after displacing a Marxist regime in the 1990s, overseeing a rapid period of economic growth and foreign investment. But after Mr. Ahmed took office in 2018, he began whittling away its influence.

Fighting has raged across northern Ethiopia since Mr. Ahmed ordered an offensive in response to an attack by TPLF forces on a government military base in November 2020. The conflict has added to the [instability in the Horn of Africa](#), a strategic region overlooking the entry to the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Neighboring Eritrea has sided with the Ethiopian government, but Egypt, wary of Ethiopia’s plans to choke off the waters of the Nile with a vast hydropower dam, has [long sought to destabilize it](#).

Some supporters of the TPLF were tortured, sexually abused and killed by Ethiopian forces and their Eritrean allies, according to rights groups, who have also accused rebel fighters of abuses. The U.S., U.K. and other Western nations warned their citizens to leave Ethiopia as rebels advanced south toward Addis Ababa, prompting the government to complain that it has been abandoned by the international community. In recent days, the government has claimed success in reversing some of the TPLF’s gains.

Mr. Ahmed has called for ordinary Ethiopians to rally around his government’s armed forces—many of whose officers are Tigrayan—instead.

Some of the country’s biggest names are now supporting the war effort. Mr. Gebrselassie, a double Olympic gold medal winner, has been vocal in his backing for Mr. Ahmed.

So, too, has Mr. Lilesa, who became famous after crossing his arms across his head as if they were shackled as he crossed the finish line to take the silver medal in the men’s marathon at the 2016 Rio Olympics. He spent years in exile after the gesture, which was intended to draw attention to the former TPLF-led government’s crackdown on pro-democracy protesters.

Last week, he traveled to the front line, around 250 miles northeast of Addis Ababa, where Mr. Ahmed is attempting to halt the rebel advance.

“There is a leader directing the war from the front,” Mr. Lilesa said. “I am not leaving my country, rather I will fight shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest.”

Some 200,000 youths have joined vigilante groups to defend the capital, according to its mayor, Adanch Abebie. Others, armed with sticks, patrol the streets each evening, searching vehicles for suspected rebels and weapons.

U.N. investigators and rights groups such as Amnesty International have accused vigilantes of participating in a brutal crackdown against ethnic Tigrayans that includes mass arrests, kidnappings, and in some instances, targeted executions. A spokeswoman for Mr. Ahmed described the allegations as “panic-mongering.”

Volunteers are a useful asset for both sides, however. Demobilized army units have been fighting alongside government troops in the Afar region in recent weeks, helping the military to reverse battlefield setbacks suffered since July. Last week, government troops recaptured the town of Chifra, forestalling a threat to cut off the highway that links landlocked Ethiopia to the coast. In recent days, government forces have recaptured two other strategic towns in the Amhara region, north of Addis Ababa.

Some volunteer fighters like Worku Alemenew, a 52-year old former army captain, have fighting experience. He battled against TPLF guerrilla fighters through the 1980s until 1991.

“My colleagues and I have solid military skills. We can be of help now more than ever,” Mr. Alemenew said in Addis Ababa, as he prepared to go to the front line.

Another soldier, identifying himself as Bennie, took a different route. After retiring from the military in 2000, he ran a textiles shop in the Tigrayan regional capital, Mekelle. When the war broke out last year, he said his shop was looted by government troops. He decided to join the TPLF fighters, training new recruits in artillery and other weaponry in the northern mountains.

“The recruits are very brave and determined,” he said. “Many joined after suffering abuses from Eritrean and government soldiers.”

TPLF forces, reinforced by militias, last month staged a raid on the strategic town of Debre Sina, 120 miles from Addis Ababa, sending government forces into retreat. Rebel leaders say their battlefield advances come from a combination of new recruits and superior training from experienced commanders who, until comparatively recently, held senior roles in the Ethiopian armed forces.

U.S. diplomats who have spent months trying to broker a truce appear to be losing patience. Last month, Jeffrey Feltman, the U.S. envoy to the region, said that Washington’s efforts were being outpaced by the “alarming developments on the ground.”

Mr. Ahmed, a longtime U.S. ally who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for brokering a truce to end the three-decade conflict with Eritrea, has continued to focus on taking the battle to the TPLF.

“Our remaining task is to rout the enemy and destroy them,” Mr. Ahmed told state television from the front lines last week, dressed in combat fatigues. His opponents, he said, “should know they have been defeated and surrender.”

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HEADLINE	12/07 Military families experience food insecurity
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/military-families-food-insecurity/
GIST	<p>Navy wife Abigail Kennedy is relieved that her kids are too young to know why they're going to a food giveaway.</p> <p>"We go to events like these so they help build our stock when times are rough," Kennedy said. "Our kids would eat Cheerios some days because that is all we had."</p> <p>The military family has been living paycheck to paycheck for the last nine years. Her family is one of nearly 700 families who received food from the Military Family Advisory Network's giveaway. On the day Kennedy visited, the nonprofit gave each family 60 pounds of frozen chicken and produce.</p> <p>"When we're seeing these cars go through and seeing kids in the back seat — yeah, we shouldn't have to host food distribution events like these," said Shannon Razsadin, the director of Military Family Advisory Network.</p> <p>An estimated 160,000 military families experienced difficulty putting food on the table in 2020, according to Feeding America, a network of food banks and meal programs that provides meals to the hungry.</p>

	<p>Troops in junior enlisted ranks are especially vulnerable to food insecurity — almost 30% need help.</p> <p>The issue has been exacerbated by a Department of Agriculture rule that restricts families from receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. Military Basic Housing Allowance — money used to pay rent — is factored in as income, preventing families in need from receiving government food benefits.</p> <p>CBS News first spotlighted the U.S. military's food insecurity in February. Low wages, frequent moves, high unemployment among military spouses and a stigma seemingly born of denial contributed to the issue — but that's slowly changing.</p> <p>For the first time, the Department of Defense commissioned a 90-day battle plan: Identify hungry military families and connect them with help.</p> <p>"Our men and women in uniform and their families have enough to worry about," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said November 17. "Basic necessities like food and housing shouldn't be among them." But Kennedy is skeptical. "I would be very, very surprised if we see anything within the next year," she said.</p> <p>Kennedy credits the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society for providing financial assistance through their quick assistance loans program in times of need.</p> <p>"They are so kind," she said. "We've actually used that, I think twice, and it's been a lifesaver."</p> <p>Most of the families helped by the Military Family Advisory Network's food giveaway will need help again. They can only live so long on resilience.</p>
Return to Top	For those who would like more information on how to help military families, visit: www.combatmilitaryhunger.org .

HEADLINE	12/07 Australia joins US in diplomatic boycott
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/australia-joins-us-diplomatic-boycott-beijing-games-81613162
GIST	<p>WELLINGTON, New Zealand -- Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Wednesday that Australia will join the U.S. in a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Games over human rights concerns.</p> <p>Morrison said it should come as no surprise that Australian officials would boycott the event after the nation's relationship with China had broken down in recent years.</p> <p>"I'm doing it because it's in Australia's national interest," Morrison said. "It's the right thing to do."</p> <p>He said Australian athletes would still be able to compete.</p> <p>As well as citing human rights abuses, Morrison said China had been very critical of Australia's efforts to have a strong defense force in the region "particularly in relation, most recently, to our decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines."</p> <p>He said his government was very happy to talk to China about their differences.</p> <p>"There's been no obstacle to that occurring on our side, but the Chinese government has consistently not accepted those opportunities for us to meet," Morrison said.</p> <p>Rights groups have pushed for a full-blown boycott of the games, accusing China of rights abuses against ethnic minorities. The U.S. and Australian decisions fall short of those calls but come at an exceptionally turbulent time for international relations and have been met with a barrage of criticism from China.</p> <p>The Australian Olympic Committee said the arrangements for the 40 or so Australian athletes expected to compete at the games would not be impacted by Morrison's announcement.</p>

	<p>“Getting the athletes to Beijing safely, competing safely and bringing them home safely remains our greatest challenge,” said Matt Carroll, the committee’s chief executive.</p> <p>“Our Australian athletes have been training and competing with this Olympic dream for four years now and we are doing everything in our power to ensure we can help them succeed,” Carroll said in a statement.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Japan military drills; Russia, China threat
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/japan-holds-drills-north-faces-russia-china-threat-81602157
GIST	<p>ENIWA, Japan -- The earth shook and explosions boomed in the crisp winter air of Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido on Tuesday, as dozens of tanks and soldiers carried out drills at a Japanese army post that has long served to keep an eye on neighboring Russia, while showcasing Japanese military prowess as Tokyo also faces China’s rise.</p> <p>A team of four tanks, each carrying three soldiers, fired shells and machine guns at targets meant to represent enemy missiles, armored vehicles or humans as hundreds of fellow soldiers cheered on the sidelines and waved their unit flags.</p> <p>The drills, which opened this week and continue through Dec. 14, involve about 1,300 Ground Self-Defense Force troops — about 550 of whom are completing the actual drills, according to the Northern Army Headquarters.</p> <p>The drill focus on training soldiers for speed and accuracy in shooting targets that randomly appear from the range of 300 meters (984 feet) to 3 kilometers (1.9 miles) during a 15-minute session.</p> <p>The training comes as China and Russia have stepped up military cooperation in recent years in an attempt to counter the region's U.S.-led bloc.</p> <p>Among Japan’s biggest worries is China’s increased naval activity, which has prompted Tokyo to rapidly step up troop deployment and missile defenses across southern Japan, including on remote islands.</p> <p>China’s buildup of military facilities in the South China Sea has heightened Tokyo’s concerns in the East China Sea, where the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands are also claimed by Beijing, which calls them Diaoyu. China has sent a fleet of armed coast guard boats to routinely circle them and to go in and out of Japanese-claimed waters, sometimes chasing Japanese fishing boats in the area.</p> <p>The result has been that Tokyo has shifted its focus on defense from northern to southern Japan in recent years. Heavy combat tanks and their units on Hokkaido — an old stronghold for Japanese forces — have also been reduced, as defense priorities have grown to include cyber, outer space and other tech dimensions.</p> <p>But Hokkaido, with its large open spaces, remains an important training ground for Japanese troops, army officials said. Besides the northern island, Japan’s main tank exercise grounds are nearby Mount Fuji and Oita in the south.</p> <p>Archconservative former premier Shinzo Abe significantly expanded Japan's military role and budget, during his more than eight-year rule, which ended in 2020. Japan has rapidly grown its role in its security alliance with Washington, and has made more purchases of costly American weapons and equipment, including fighter jets and missile interceptors.</p> <p>Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who took office in October, said during his first troop review that he would consider “all options,” including possibly pursuing pre-emptive strike capabilities to further</p>

	“increase Japan’s defense power” — a divisive issue that opponents say violates the country's pacifist constitution.
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HEADLINE	12/07 Hawaii halts Navy fuel storage operations
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/water-contamination-hawaii-officials-call-navy-suspend-operations/story?id=81582251
GIST	<p>The Hawaii Department of Health is issuing an emergency order to the Navy to immediately halt operations at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility following reports of water contamination.</p> <p>The news comes about a week after health officials and the Navy ordered residents of Pearl Harbor and the surrounding area to stop using water out of the tap after dangerous levels of petroleum products were found in the Navy's Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam water system.</p> <p>"Hawai'i's wellbeing and the safety of our residents, including military families, must come first," Gov. David Ige said in a tweet. "We cannot have national security without ensuring public health and safety. There are still important questions that need to be answered and the Order will help get there."</p> <p>The DOH says the Navy is responsible for ensuring safe water for nearby residents and has been ordered to provide alternative drinking water for the roughly 93,000 people who may be affected.</p> <p>The DOH also ordered the Navy to immediately install a drinking water treatment system at the Red Hill Shaft and submit a work plan to assess system integrity. The Navy must then defuel the underground storage tanks there within 30 days of completing corrective action.</p> <p>"Test results confirming contamination of drinking water at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam show that the Navy is not effectively operating the World War II-era facility," the statement from Ige and Hawaii's congressional delegation read.</p> <p>The DOH has received almost 500 complaints of fuel or gasoline-like odor from people who receive water from the Navy water system.</p> <p>"The Navy is developing a plan to restore the potable water system to EPA standards, identify how this contaminant got in the well, and fix the well," a Dec. 3 press release from the Navy stated.</p> <p>On Nov. 20, Navy Region Hawaii Public Affairs released a statement concerning a leakage of water and fuel at a nearby tank farm. At the time they reported there were "no signs or indication of any releases to the environment, and the drinking water remains safe to drink."</p> <p>The DOH later said it collected drinking water samples on Nov. 24 from the Red Hill water supply shaft as a part of routine testing. The results suggested "a trace amount of heavy oil in the samples well below drinking water thresholds and not clearly related to petroleum fuel."</p> <p>The second set of samples taken on Nov. 29, following public reports, tested negative for petroleum products. On Dec. 1, the DOH confirmed the presence of petroleum in a water sample.</p> <p>The DOH recommends that anyone who can smell fuel in their water should not to use it for drinking, cooking or oral hygiene.</p> <p>"[The Navy is] paralyzed in finding a solution to this problem. Last night, they were saying this is a natural disaster and that's how we should look at this. This is a man-made disaster. The Navy really has to pick up the pace in which it addresses solutions," said Sen. Glenn Wakai, according to a tweet from the Hawaii State Senate.</p>

The Board of Water Supply also shut down its own largest water source in connection with the Navy's leak.

"We are deeply concerned that we were not notified immediately by the Navy regarding the shut down of their Red Hill water source," stated Manager and Chief Engineer Ernest Lau [in a press release](#). "We have data that shows when they stop pumping at Red Hill, water starts moving in the direction of our Halawa Shaft due to our pumping. In an abundance of caution, we must shut down Halawa Shaft until further notice."

Exposure to the contaminated water can lead to nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, dizziness and more, according [to military public health experts](#). They say the long-term health effects of exposure are "not clear."

They urge residents who experience these symptoms to eliminate all exposure to the water source, get more fresh air and rest, clean exposed skin, and seek medical attention if experiencing serious conditions.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/07 TPS sent fake discount email to employees
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article256401521.html
GIST	<p>At first glimpse, the email seemed like good news: all employees with Tacoma Public Schools are eligible for 20-50 percent discounts and free shipping with Amazon for the months of November and December.</p> <p>"To show our appreciation for all your efforts this year, Tacoma Public Schools is partnering in a holiday discount program with Amazon," said the email, sent Friday from what appeared to be district Human Resources.</p> <p>It wasn't true.</p> <p>The email was a fake, the district confirmed with The News Tribune on Monday.</p> <p>It was sent by the district to its staff as part of an effort to educate its workforce on phishing scams that can put the district's security at risk.</p> <p>"We have had an ongoing internal program of educating our workforce about cybersecurity, password protection, and the risks of clicking on links in phishing emails," district spokesperson Dan Voelpel said in an email on Monday. "Part of that program involves sending periodic fake phishing emails and tracking who clicks on them so that we can follow up with reminders and explain how REAL phishing emails work and may look like they're coming from legitimate sources."</p> <p>The email upset some school employees, who say that it was harsh to send during the holiday season when many people might be feeling financial stress.</p> <p>Tina Taylor, a teacher at Bryant Montessori School in Tacoma, said she saw the email circulating on social media before opening it in her inbox, so she knew it was fake and didn't click on it. But the subject of the email — promising a major discount during the holidays and a pandemic — was in poor taste by the district, she said. "There are lots of people who are working second and third jobs to make ends meet and that could have made a difference," she said.</p> <p>Ed Grassia, chief information officer for Tacoma Public Schools, sent a letter to TPS employees on Tuesday explaining that during the holiday season, TPS sees an increase in cyber attacks on its system.</p> <p>"Please know that our intent is always to use these cyber security efforts as a way to help educate you in a safe manner," Grassia said. "Personally, I know how frustrating these can be and I want to work with you</p>

to learn to protect yourselves and the District. After sending this phishing test, it became clear to me that the subject matter and timing frustrated many within the District. Please know that the intent of this phishing test and any of our cybersecurity efforts is not to anger or upset anyone.”

Tacoma Public Schools has a contract with KnowBe4, a company that provides security awareness training to help people identify phishing emails. The company has a portfolio of phishing email templates to select and customize for TPS. Phishing scams can help criminals not only steal identities and hack bank accounts but also take over an organization’s network. Phishing scams soared since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as many people worked from home. KnowBe4 states on its website that “Cybercrime is moving at light speed” and that “organization of every size and type are at risk.”

Voelpel said that 18.6 percent of recipients clicked on the link in the fake email sent by Tacoma Public Schools last week. TPS employs more than 4,000 people. Clicking the link didn’t harm anyone’s computer, but a message popped reminding users of the red flags of phishing emails. Similarly, if users reported the email as a phishing attempt, they were congratulated.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Fear: rise third-party attacks; ransomware
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/businesses-fear-rise-of-third-party-attacks-as-ransomware-impact-grows/
GIST	<p>The majority of global businesses believe supply chain attacks can become a major threat within the next three years, with 45% experiencing at least one such attack in the last 12 months. This figure is higher, at 48%, in the Asia-Pacific region, where organisations also are reporting more ransomware attacks and paying out higher ransoms than their global counterparts.</p> <p>Worldwide, 84% of enterprises expressed concerns third-party attacks could become a major cyber threat over the next three years, according to a report commissioned by CrowdStrike. However, just 36% had vetted all their software suppliers for security purposes in the past year, including 40% in Asia-Pacific.</p> <p>Conducted by market researcher Vanson Bourne, the study surveyed 2,200 senior IT security executives and decision makers across 12 global markets between September and November this year. These included four in Asia-Pacific, where 300 respondents were from India, 200 each from Japan and Australia, and 100 from Singapore.</p> <p>At 87%, more in Asia-Pacific than the global average expressed concerns supply chain attacks were becoming a major cyber threat, the study revealed.</p> <p>Amongst the 48% in the region that reported at least one such attack in the past year, 36% were from Singapore where 57% could not ascertain that they had vetted all their software suppliers for security purposes.</p> <p>Some 69% in Asia-Pacific also encountered at least one ransomware attack in the past 12 months, higher than the global average of 66%. This figure was 64% in Singapore.</p> <p>APAC CLOCK HIGHEST RANSOM PAYOUT</p> <p>Asia-Pacific also clocked the highest average ransomware payment of \$2.35 million per attack, compared to \$1.55 million in the US and \$1.34 million in EMEA. The global average ransomware payout climbed 63% this year to \$1.79 million, up from \$1.1 million last year, according to the report, which noted that attackers demanded an average \$6 million in ransom payment.</p> <p>Worldwide, 96% of respondents that paid the initial ransom had to pay additional extortion fees of \$792,493 on average. The report noted that 57% of companies that suffered a ransomware attack acknowledged they did not had a defence strategy in place to coordinate a response. This figure was 53% in Asia-Pacific.</p> <p>Singapore respondents that chose to fork out a ransom demand paid the lowest average at \$1.46 million in the region, compared to India at \$2.92 million, Japan at \$2.25 million, and Australia \$1.53 million.</p>

Some 93% of Singapore organisations that paid a ransom forked out additional extortion fees averaging \$619,231 per attack, which again was the lowest in the region where their Indian counterparts paid an average of about \$1.15 million in additional extortion fees per attack, while those in Japan paid \$950,000, and Australia clocked at \$785,345 per attack.

Singapore took 119 hours to detect a cybersecurity incident, quicker than the average 205 hours in Asia-Pacific, but required a longer 15 hours to investigate and triage, compared to the regional average of 14 hours.

Organisations in Singapore also took an average 30 hours to contain and remediate security incidents, almost double the Asia-Pacific average of 19 hours. Some 60% in the city-state cited [remote work](#) as the source of an intrusion, while 75% in Asia-Pacific and 69% worldwide said likewise.

Globally, organisations took an average 146 hours to detect a cybersecurity incident, up from 117 hours last year, and needed 11 hours to triage and understand an incident. They required 16 hours on average to contain and remediate a security incident.

Amidst the rise in frequency of security incidents, the report noted that 63% were "losing trust" in legacy software vendors including previously trusted providers such as Microsoft. In Asia-Pacific, this figure clocked at 66%.

CrowdStrike CTO Michael Sentonas said: "Adversaries continue to exploit organisations around the world and circumvent outdated technologies. Today's threat environment is costing businesses around the world millions of dollars and causing additional fallout. The evolving remote workplace is surely accentuating challenges for businesses as legacy software like Microsoft struggles to keep up in today's accelerated digital world.

"This presents a clear clarion call that businesses need to change the way they operate and evaluate more stringently the suppliers they work with," Sentonas said.

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HEADLINE	12/07 SolarWinds attackers new tactics, malware
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/solarwinds-attackers-new-tactics-malware/176818/
GIST	<p>One year after the notorious and far-reaching SolarWinds supply-chain attacks, its orchestrators are on the offensive again. Researchers said they've seen the threat group – which Microsoft refers to as “Nobelium” and which is linked to Russia’s spy agency – compromising global business and government targets with novel tactics and custom malware, stealing data and moving laterally across networks.</p> <p>Researchers from Mandiant have identified two distinct clusters of activity that can be “plausibly” attributed to the threat group, which they track as UNC2452, they said in a report published Monday.</p> <p>Mandiant has tracked the latest activity as UNC3004 and UNC2652 since last year and throughout 2021, observing the compromise of a range of companies that provide technology solutions, cloud and other services as well as resellers, they said.</p> <p>Indeed, resellers were the target of a campaign by Nobelium that Microsoft revealed in October, in which the group was seen using credential-stuffing and phishing, as well as API abuse and token theft, to gather legitimate account credentials and privileged access to reseller networks. The ultimate goal of this campaign seemed to be to reach downstream customer networks, researchers said at the time.</p> <p>Nobelium also engaged in credential theft in April using a backdoor called FoggyWeb to attack ActiveDirectory servers, Microsoft revealed in September.</p>

In the latest clusters observed by Mandiant, stolen credentials also facilitated initial access to the targeted organizations. However, researchers believe the threat actors acquired the credentials from an info-stealer malware campaign of a third party rather than one of their own, they said.

Novel Malware and Activity

Attackers have added a number of novel tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) to bypass security restrictions within environments, including the extraction of virtual machines to determine internal routing configurations, researchers wrote.

They also have new malware in their arsenal: a new, bespoke downloader that researchers have called Ceeloader. The malware, which is heavily obfuscated, is written in C and can execute shellcode payloads directly in memory, they wrote.

A Cobalt Strike beacon installs and executes Ceeloader, which itself does not have persistence and so can't run automatically when Windows is started. The malware can evade security protections, however, by mixing calls to the Windows API with large blocks of useless code, researchers said.

Other activity observed in the attacks includes using accounts with application impersonation privileges to harvest sensitive mail data, using residential IP proxy services and newly provisioned geo-located infrastructure to communicate with compromised victims, and abuse of multi-factor authentication (MFA) to leverage "push" notifications on smartphones, researchers said.

As with other Nobelium campaigns, the motive for the clusters appears to be cyberespionage, as the attacks show the actors targeting companies to steal data "relevant to Russian interests," according to Mandiant.

"In some instances, the data theft appears to be obtained primarily to create new routes to access other victim environments," researchers wrote.

Potential for Downstream Compromise

The so-called SolarWinds "Solorigate" attack that was discovered last December is now the stuff of legend. It became a cautionary tale for how quickly and how far a cyberattack can spread through a global supply chain.

In those attacks, which affected numerous organizations – including [Microsoft](#) and the [Department of Homeland Security](#) – Nobelium used a malicious binary called "Sunburst" as a backdoor into SolarWinds.Orion.Core.BusinessLayer.dll, a SolarWinds digitally signed component of the Orion software framework. The component is a plugin that communicates via HTTP to third-party servers, allowing the attack to proliferate quickly.

There is similar potential for widespread attack in the new clusters observed by Mandiant, researchers said. They observed "multiple instances where the threat actor compromised service providers and used the privileged access and credentials belonging to these providers to compromise downstream customers," they said.

Attackers also used credentials they appear to have obtained from the third-party info-stealer campaign to gain access to an organization's Microsoft 365 environment via a stolen session token. Researchers identified the info-stealer CRYPTBOT on some of the affected systems shortly before the token was generated, researchers said.

"Mandiant assesses with moderate confidence that the threat actor obtained the session token from the operators of the info-stealer malware," researchers wrote. "These tokens were used by the actor via public VPN providers to authenticate to the target's Microsoft 365 environment."

MFA Push Abuse

	<p>One novel and rather creative technique researchers observed Nobelium using in the attacks is the abuse of repeated MFA push notifications to gain access to corporate accounts, researchers wrote.</p> <p>Many MFA providers allow for users to accept a phone app push notification or to receive a phone call and press a key as a second factor to authenticate access to an account.</p> <p>Using a valid username and password combination, the researchers said that the attackers issued multiple MFA requests to an end user's legitimate device until the target accepted the authentication. This ultimately granted the threat actor access to the account, they said.</p> <p>All in all, the new clusters show that Nobelium's potential for dangerous threat activity seems to be rising in both sophistication and intensity, signaling the potential for another SolarWinds-style attack on the horizon, observed one security professional.</p> <p>"Cyberwarfare is now simply a part of modern geopolitical life, so we cannot expect these attacks to ease up any time soon, especially from state-sponsored actors," noted Erich Kron, security awareness advocate at security firm KnowBe4, in an email to Threatpost. "These attacks will continue to escalate as techniques improve and more resources are allocated to cyberwarfare."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Mining malware targets QNAP NAS devices
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/warning-yet-another-bitcoin-mining.html
GIST	<p>Network-attached storage (NAS) appliance maker QNAP on Tuesday released a new advisory warning of a cryptocurrency mining malware targeting its devices, urging customers to take preventive steps with immediate effect.</p> <p>"A bitcoin miner has been reported to target QNAP NAS. Once a NAS is infected, CPU usage becomes unusually high where a process named '[oom_reaper]' could occupy around 50% of the total CPU usage," the Taiwanese company said in an alert. "This process mimics a kernel process but its [process identifier] is usually greater than 1000."</p> <p>QNAP said it's currently investigating the infections, but did not share more information on the initial access vector that's being used to compromise the NAS devices. Affected users can remove the malware by restarting the appliances.</p> <p>In the interim, the company is recommending that users update their QTS (and QuTS Hero) operating systems to the latest version, enforce strong passwords for administrator and other user accounts, and refrain from exposing the NAS devices to the internet.</p> <p>QNAP NAS devices have long been a lucrative target for a number of malicious campaigns in recent years.</p> <p>In July 2020, cybersecurity agencies in the U.S. and U.K. issued a joint bulletin about a threat that infected the NAS devices with a data-stealing malware dubbed QSnatch (or Derek). In December 2020, the device maker warned of two high-severity cross-site scripting flaws (CVE-2020-2495 and CVE-2020-2496) that enabled remote adversaries to take over the devices.</p> <p>Then in March 2021, Qihoo 360's Network Security Research Lab disclosed a cryptocurrency campaign that exploited two security flaws in the firmware — CVE-2020-2506 and CVE-2020-2507 — to gain root privileges and deploy a miner called UnityMiner on compromised devices. And as of April this year, QNAP NAS devices have also been the target of eCh0raix and Qlocker ransomware attacks.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 France transport giant leaked workers' data
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/french-transport-giant-exposes/

GIST	<p>A state-owned French transportation giant has inadvertently exposed nearly 60,000 employees to identity fraud after leaking their personal information via an unsecured HTTP server, according to researchers.</p> <p>A team at vpnMentor found the server on October 13, and deduced from the file names that the culprit was Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens (RATP), which runs public transport across the French capital and beyond.</p> <p>The organization apparently never replied to the team, but the French CERT was more responsive and shut the privacy snafu down “shortly after.”</p> <p>The server was left “open and accessible to anyone with basic web browsing skills,” according to vpnMentor.</p> <p>The team wrote that it contained an SQL database backup dating back to 2018 with over three million records. This featured the details of 57,000 RATP employees — including senior executives and the cybersecurity team.</p> <p>Among the data were full names, email addresses, logins for their RATP employee accounts and MD5-hashed passwords.</p> <p>“In theory, hackers could still crack some of the passwords by converting billions of plaintext passwords into MD5 hashes and seeing if any match with those stored on RATP’s server,” vpnMentor argued. “This wouldn’t take very long, as a basic modern commercial laptop is powerful enough to convert tens of billions of MD5 hashes per second.”</p> <p>With the stolen information, threat actors could have targeted employees with phishing emails designed to elicit more sensitive data, and launched follow-on fraud attempts.</p> <p>However, potentially even more serious was a separate folder containing source code related to RATP’s employee benefits web portal. Within the code were API keys that enabled access to the sensitive info about the website’s backend, the team wrote.</p> <p>This included RATP’s GitHub account, which could be highly valuable to threat actors. Depending on the permissions granted by the keys, it could allow hackers to create or delete projects, deploy ransomware and embed malicious backdoors into RATP’s apps, websites, and network, the report noted.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 STOP ransomware vaccine released
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/stop-ransomware-vaccine-released-to-block-encryption/
GIST	<p>German security software company G DATA has released a vaccine that will block STOP Ransomware from encrypting victims' files after infection.</p> <p>"This tool does not prevent the infection itself. STOP ransomware will still place ransom notes and may change settings on the systems," G DATA malware analysts Karsten Hahn and John Parol explained.</p> <p>"But STOP ransomware will not encrypt files anymore if the system has the vaccine. Instead of a personal ID, the ransom notes will contain a string that files were protected by the vaccine."</p> <p>You can download the STOP Ransomware vaccine here, as a compiled .EXE or Python script.</p> <p>This vaccine may cause your security software to believe your system is infected since it works by adding files the malware usually deploys on infected systems to trick the ransomware the device was already compromised.</p>

While a [decryptor was also released for STOP Ransomware](#) in October 2019 by Emsisoft and Michael Gillespie to decrypt files encrypted by 148 variants for free, it no longer works with newer variants. Hence, G DATA's vaccine is your best bet if you want protection against this ransomware strain.

However, since threat actors commonly bypass vaccines after they are released, this vaccine may stop working for future versions of this ransomware.

Therefore, after applying the vaccine, you should ensure that your important files are also backed up!

STOP Ransomware — the most active ransomware nobody talks about

While other ransomware strains get the most media attention, STOP ransomware has constantly been behind the most significant slice of ID Ransomware submissions and support requests on [BleepingComputer's forums](#) in recent years.

Out of thousands of [ID Ransomware](#) submissions per day during high ransomware activity, anywhere between 60 and 70 % are STOP ransomware submissions.

This is because this ransomware mainly targets home users through shady sites and adware bundles that push malicious software cracks or adware bundles disguised as free programs.

The latter usually install a wide range of unwanted software onto a user's computer, and, more often than not, one of the programs installed is malware such as STOP Ransomware.

Cracks reported to have been used in STOP Ransomware delivery include KMSPico, Cubase, Photoshop, and antivirus software.

Besides using this deployment method, STOP is just your ordinary ransomware, which encrypts files, appends an extension, and drops a note asking for a ransom ranging from \$500 to \$1000.

However, what makes it so successful is the massive amount of variants constantly being released to avoid detection.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Universities targeted: Office 365 phishing
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/us-universities-targeted-by-office-365-phishing-attacks/
GIST	<p>US universities are being targeted in multiple phishing attacks designed to impersonate college login portals to steal valuable Office 365 credentials.</p> <p>The lures used in the latest campaigns include COVID-19 Delta and Omicron variants and various themes on how these allegedly impact the educational programs.</p> <p>These campaigns are believed to be conducted by multiple threat actors starting in October 2021, with Proofpoint sharing details on the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used in the phishing attacks.</p> <p>Targeting US universities</p> <p>The phishing attack begins with an email that pretends to be information about the new Omicron variant, COVID-19 test results, additional testing requirements, or class changes.</p> <p>These emails urge the recipient to click on an attached HTM file, which takes them to a cloned login page for their university's login portal.</p> <p>The samples published by Proofpoint look very convincing in terms of their appearance, and URLs use a similar naming pattern that includes the .edu top-level domain.</p>

For example, a phishing attack targeting students of Arkansas State University used an URL of sso2[.]astate[.]edu[.]boring[.]cf.

Other examples of malicious domains set up to support the phishing campaign are given below:

- sso[.]ucmo[.]edu[.]boring[.]cf/Covid19/authenticationpoint.html
- hfbciblestudy[.]org/demo1/includes/jah/[university]/auth[.]php*
- afr-tours[.]co[.]za/includes/css/js/edu/web/etc/login[.]php*
- traveloid[.]com/css/js/[university]/auth[.]php*

HTM attachments are having great success in phishing lately because they enable actors to [smuggle malware](#) and assemble it on the target device. In this case, however, the HTM contains a link to a credential-stealing site.

In some cases (marked with an asterisk), these destinations are legitimate WordPress sites that were compromised to steal credentials, so no alarms will be raised by internet security or email protection tools when the victim lands on them.

Based on the URLs shared by Proofpoint, some of the universities targeted in these attacks include the University of Central Missouri, Vanderbilt, Arkansas State University, Purdue, Auburn, West Virginia University, and the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh.

Snatching Duo OTPs

To bypass MFA (multi-factor authentication) protection on targeted university login pages, the threat actors have also created landing pages that spoof a DUO MFA page, which is used to steal the one-time passcodes sent to students and faculty.

After a victim enters their credentials on the spoofed login page, the victim is requested to enter the code they received via SMS on their phone so that actors can snatch it and use it directly to take over the account.

This step requires immediate action since OTPs have short expiration times.

Implications

Office 365 credentials can be used by malicious actors to access the corresponding email account, send messages to other users in the workgroup, divert payments, and further the phishing to steal more valuable accounts.

Additionally, the actor can access and exfiltrate sensitive information stored in the account's OneDrive and SharePoint folders.

These phishing attacks could potentially lead to damaging BEC incidents and highly-disruptive ransomware infections for universities.

HTM files are opened in a browser, so technically, you can never be 100% safe. Do not give in to the curiosity if you receive one as an attachment in an unsolicited email.

Just mark the message as spam and delete it.

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HEADLINE	12/08 Mirai-based botnet 'Moobot' spreads
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/moobot-botnet-spreading-via-hikvision-camera-vulnerability/
GIST	A Mirai-based botnet called 'Moobot' is spreading aggressively via exploiting a critical command injection flaw in the webserver of many Hikvision products.

Hikvision is a state-owned Chinese manufacturer of surveillance cameras and equipment that the US government sanctioned due to human rights abuse.

This vulnerability is tracked as CVE-2021-36260 and can be exploited remotely by sending specially crafted messages containing malicious commands.

Hikvision fixed the flaw [back in September 2021](#) with a firmware update (v 210628), but not all users rushed to apply the security update.

Fortinet reports that Moobot is leveraging this flaw to compromise unpatched devices and extract sensitive data from victims.

The infection process

The exploitation of the flaw is fairly simple, given that it doesn't require authentication and can be triggered by sending a message to a publicly exposed vulnerable device.

Among the various payloads that leverage [CVE-2021-36260](#), Fortinet found a downloader masked as "macHelper," which fetches and executes Moobot with the "hikivision" parameter.

The malware also modifies basic commands like "reboot" so that they do not function properly and will prevent the administrator from rebooting the compromised device.

A new spin of Mirai

[Fortinet's analysts](#) have spotted common points between Moobot and Mirai, such as the data string used in the random alphanumeric string generator function.

Moreover, Moobot features some elements from Satori, a different Mirai variant whose author was arrested and [sentenced in the summer of 2020](#).

Similarities with Satori include:

- Using a separate downloader.
- The forking of the "/usr/sbin*" process.
- Overwriting the legitimate "macHelper" file with the Moobot executable.

It is essential to underline that this is not the first time Moobot was spotted in the wild, as researchers at [Unit 42 first discovered it](#) in February 2021.

However, the fact that the botnet is still adding new CVEs indicates that it is being actively developed and enriched with new targeting potential.

Enlisting you into a DDoS army

The goal of Moobot is to incorporate the compromised device into a DDoS swarm.

The C2 sends a SYN flood command along with the target IP address and port number to attack.

Other commands that the C2 server may send include 0x06 for UDP flood, 0x04 for ACK flood, and 0x05 for ACK+PUSH flood.

By looking into the captured packet data, Fortinet could track down a Telegram channel that started offering DDoS services last August.

Having your device enlisted in DDoS swarms results in increased energy consumption, accelerated wear, and causes the device to become unresponsive.

The best way to protect your IoT devices from botnets is to apply available security updates as soon as possible, isolate them in a dedicated network, and replace the default credentials with strong passwords.

HEADLINE	12/07 Cerber ransomware is back
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/new-cerber-ransomware-targets-confluence-and-gitlab-servers/
GIST	<p>Cerber ransomware is back, as a new ransomware family adopts the old name and targets Atlassian Confluence and GitLab servers using remote code execution vulnerabilities.</p> <p>As ransomware began picking up pace in 2016, a new Cerber ransomware operation emerged that quickly became one of the most prolific gangs at the time. However, its activity slowly tapered off until it disappeared at the end of 2019.</p> <p>Starting last month, a ransomware called Cerber once again reared its ugly head, as it began infecting victims worldwide with both a Windows and Linux encryptor.</p> <p>The new version of Cerber is creating ransom notes named <code>__\$RECOVERY_README\$___.html</code> and appending the .locked extension to encrypted files.</p> <p>From the victims seen by BleepingComputer, the new Cerber ransomware gang is demanding ransoms ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000.</p> <p>Emsisoft CTO and ransomware expert Fabian Wosar examined the new variant and said it does not match the code of the older family. In particular, the new version uses the Crypto+++ library, while the older variant used Windows CryptoAPI libraries.</p> <p>These code differences and the fact that the original Cerber did not have a Linux variant lead us to believe that a new threat actor has adopted the name, ransom note, and Tor payment site, and is not the original operation.</p> <p>Targeting Confluence and GitLab servers</p> <p>This week, security researchers and vendors have seen the new Cerber ransomware operation hacking servers using remote code execution vulnerabilities in Atlassian Confluence and GitLab.</p> <p>BoanBird also shared a link to the GitLab forums where admins disclosed that Cerber exploits a recently disclosed vulnerability in GitLab's ExifTool component.</p> <p>These vulnerabilities are tracked as CVE-2021-26084 (Confluence) and CVE-2021-22205 (GitLab) and can be exploited remotely without authentication. Additionally, both vulnerabilities have publicly disclosed proof-of-concept (PoC) exploits, allowing attackers to breach servers easily.</p> <p>A report released this week by researchers at Tencent shows that attacks deploying the new Cerber ransomware are mostly targeting the United States, Germany, and China.</p> <p>Although the previous version of Cerber excluded targets in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), Tencent's telemetry data from the recent attacks shows otherwise. Furthermore, BleepingComputer has also independently confirmed multiple victims in Russia, indicating that these threat actors are indiscriminate in who they target.</p> <p>At this time, the best approach to protect against Cerber would be to apply the available security updates for Atlassian Confluence and GitLab.</p> <p>However, as more servers are patched, we should expect the threat actors to target other vulnerabilities to breach servers.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Virtual network flaw in AWS, other clouds
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/virtual-network-vulnerability-found-in-aws-other-clouds
GIST	<p>A vulnerability in a library created by network virtualization firm Eltima — and used by a variety of vendors, including Amazon — has left more than a dozen cloud services vulnerable to a privilege escalation attack.</p> <p>Research from security firm SentinelOne found that the vulnerabilities in Eltima's software development kit (SDK) for virtual networking — which is used by a variety of cloud-based virtualization services, including Amazon's WorkSpaces agent, its Nimble Studio AMI, and Eltima's USB Network Gate — could allow an attacker to execute code in the kernel through a buffer overflow to gain higher privileges.</p> <p>The ability to elevate privileges to kernel or root would allow malicious software to turn off security products and gain access to sensitive information that would otherwise be protected, says J.A. Guerrero-Saade, a principal threat researcher at SentinelOne.</p> <p>"It's important to pay attention to these different privilege escalation vulnerabilities precisely because they allow run-of-the-mill threats to act unimpeded," he says. "When used properly, [such a] vulnerability can effectively alter security policies and disable the very security products that customers depend on to be protected."</p> <p>The impact of a single SDK on more than a dozen services shows the problems posed by supply chain risks, SentinelOne stated in its advisory. Vulnerabilities in a common SDK are being inherited by software products that rely on it, an event that has become increasingly common. While open source projects are commonly the source of such code — and subsequent vulnerabilities — the projects have become better at patching issues, reducing the average time to update to 28 days in 2021, down from 371 days a decade ago.</p> <p>Yet application programming interfaces (APIs) — a common way to allow developers to use code as a service — also have become a source of supply chain vulnerabilities. Last month, a researcher presented methods for bypassing Amazon's API Gateway and using the service to conduct cache-poisoning attacks.</p> <p>The latest vulnerabilities found by SentinelOne are not in the various services themselves but in the USB over Ethernet functionality, which is included in the Eltima SDK. The security flaws not only affect client systems, such as laptops and desktops running Amazon WorkSpaces software, but also cloud-based machine instances running that are using services, such as Amazon Nimble Studio AMI.</p> <p>Wider Implications</p> <p>SentinelOne confirmed the issues in Amazon Web Services, NoMachine, and Accops, but believes that other cloud vendors are likely affected as well.</p> <p>"Vulnerabilities in third-party code have the potential to put huge numbers of products, systems, and ultimately, end users at risk, as we've noted before," SentinelOne stated in its advisory. "The outsized effect of vulnerable dependency code is magnified even further when it appears in services offered by cloud providers. We urge all organizations relying on the affected services to review the recommendations above and take appropriate action."</p> <p>The vulnerabilities occur because the code does not check calls to validate, probe, lock, or map the buffer, according to SentinelOne. While SentinelOne used an overflow to execute code, double fetches and arbitrary pointer dereferences are also possible, the company said.</p> <p>The vulnerabilities affects software from Amazon, Accops, Eltima, Amzetta, and NoMachine. SentinelOne originally disclosed the issues to the companies in May, June, and July. Amazon released patched versions of its software in July, and other companies released updated software in September and October.</p> <p>"We have listed different software and cloud products that we are aware of that rely on the Eltima SDK and the respective vendors have done their best to mitigate the issue," says SentinelOne's Guerrero-Saade.</p>

	<p>"We encourage enterprise defenders and end users to make sure the relevant products are patched and up-to-date. Furthermore, software developers that rely on the Eltima SDK for their solutions need to make sure that they're using the latest version and to provide updates downstream as needed."</p> <p>Companies should urge their cloud virtualization service provider to check whether they use the Eltima USB over Ethernet library, even if the company is not listed among the affected vendors. Amazon Web Services customers can check their maintenance settings, while Accops and NoMachine both have released advisories.</p> <p>So far, there has been no evidence that the vulnerabilities have been exploited in the wild, SentinelOne stated in its advisory.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Dark web has own people's court
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/the-dark-web-has-its-own-people-s-courts
GIST	<p>There may be no honor among cyberthieves. But at least a few appear to be abiding by a set of underground rules for sorting out differences among themselves over broken promises, unpaid dues, and ineffective malware.</p> <p>Researchers from threat intelligence firm Analyst1 recently analyzed the workings of several major cybercrime forums and discovered at least two of them to have an informal kind of court system in place where criminals can file grievances and settle disputes with peers. Analyst1's research showed that dozens of cases from around the Dark Web escalate to these courts daily and wait for forum administration members to settle the disputes.</p> <p>Analyst1 counted over 600 threads pertaining to cases that have been filed in these courts. The amounts at dispute in such cases typically ranged from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, though a handful involved disputes over much higher sums. In April 2021, for instance, an operator and penetration testing outfit affiliated with the Conti ransomware group were sued for \$2 million for not living up to an agreement involving the hacking and encryption of data of a US-based school system.</p> <p>That case ended in favor of the two Conti affiliates after a "trial" process that lasted some one-and-a-half months. But in many other instances, criminals filing the disputes have won, says Jon DiMaggio, chief security strategist at Analyst1.</p> <p>"It happens all the time," DiMaggio says. "The system would not work if the plaintiffs were not paid once the arbitrator makes a decision."</p> <p>DarkSide in the Hot Seat</p> <p>Earlier this year, researchers from Huntress Labs, also reported on criminal hackers having their own codes of conduct and a sort of underground court system for enforcing them. One case the company monitored involved multiple complaints against the operators of the DarkSide ransomware-as-a-service outfit from affiliates seeking payments for attacks they had carried out with the malware.</p> <p>The complaints were filed when DarkSide abruptly ceased operations after US authorities and others identified it as the group behind the attack on Colonial Pipeline that triggered temporary oil supply shortages along the US East Coast. The claims were settled by administrators of the cybercrime forum where the complaints were filed, and money was paid to the "plaintiffs" from a DarkSide escrow account created for precisely such eventualities.</p> <p>Analyst1 found that threats actors can file cases against each other for a variety of reasons. As one example, it pointed to a threat actor that might have purchased access to a compromised network from an access broker only to discover it has been sold previously to another threat actor. The threat actor in this case would initiate action against the broker by providing details of the incident in a dedicated sub-forum typically titled Court or Arbitrage.</p>

Here the "plaintiff" would provide details of the claim, such as the nickname of the broker, a link to their contact information on services such as Jabber and Telegram, and evidence including chat logs, screenshots, and other transactions that involved the alleged violation. An arbiter is then assigned to the case to examine the details and listen to counterclaims by the alleged violator. The hacker's court gives every forum member the right to participate in the process, but only the arbiter makes the final decision.

When a decision is in favor of the plaintiff, the "defendant" has a set amount of time to make amends or face the prospect of being banned from any future activity on the forum. Typically, well-established cybercrime operators make a bitcoin deposit into an escrow account as proof of their ability to pay for service. Threat actors are paid from this account when a dispute is settled in their favor.

"No one will buy access to a potential compromised target or purchase malware if they see the seller/service operator went through arbitration and did not pay out once the arbitrator made their decision," DiMaggio says.

Analyst1, like other security firms, discovered that most cybercrime forums have banned all ransomware related topics, transactions, and arbitrages. The ban was put in place shortly after the Colonial Pipeline breach and appears to be in response to heightened law-enforcement activity targeting ransomware operators following the attack.

Reputations on the Line

Threat actors operating in large underground forums often are quick to comply with underground court decisions because they want to protect their reputations.

"Criminals work hard to build their reputation on these forums," DiMaggio says. "These forums are where ransomware affiliate recruiting takes place as well as malware sales, breach, and exploit access, and even hacking services are offered."

Losing trust or getting banned from a forum can have a huge negative impact on a threat actor's ability to operate in the cyber underground, he says. In some extreme cases, threat actors have exposed the true identities of the cybercriminals — including physical address, social media profiles, and phone numbers — that might have scammed them, Analyst1 said.

John Hammond, senior security researcher at Huntress, says practically every cybercrime forum or bulletin board has a sort of judicial system, or a "people's court" for handling disputes among criminals. "It's a strange sort of sportsmanship or code of conduct, where hackers, thieves, and scammers should not cross each other," he says.

Hammond says often the arbiter handling a dispute decides the verdict based on the evidence the plaintiff presents, as well as general opinion from the broader community on the forum.

"If found guilty, the accused can be banned from the community, placed on a public wall of shame, and have their bad reputation shared within other underground syndicates," he says.

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HEADLINE	12/08 Emotet operators change tactics
SOURCE	https://securityaffairs.co/wordpress/125384/cyber-crime/emotet-cobalt-strike.html?web_view=true
GIST	Emotet malware now directly installs Cobalt Strike beacons to give the attackers immediate access to the target network and allow them to carry out malicious activities, such as launching ransomware attacks. In a classic attack chain, the Emotet malware would install the TrickBot or Qbot trojans on infected devices, which in turn would deploy Cobalt Strike on an infected system.

Emotet research group [Cryptolaemus](#) recently noticed a switch in the tactics of Emotet operators, which now are directly installing Cobalt Strike beacons on infected devices without installing the above intermediate Trojans.

Reducing the attack chain will allow the threat actors to rapidly move to the second stage of the attack, such as installing ransomware on the infected network.

A Flash Alert shared by security firm Cofense with [Bleeping Computer](#) confirms the new technique used in the attacks.

“While the Cobalt Strike sample was running, it attempted to contact the domain lartmana[.]com. Shortly afterward, Emotet uninstalled the Cobalt Strike executable.” [reads the alert](#).

Cofense researchers speculate the new attack chain might have been a test, or even unintentional, anyway the researchers will continue to monitor the evolution of the tactics for Emotet operators.

Early this year, law enforcement and judicial authorities worldwide [conducted a joint operation](#), named [Operation Ladybird](#), which disrupted the EMOTET botnet. At the time the investigators have taken control of its infrastructure in an international coordinated action.

This operation was the result of a joint effort between authorities in the Netherlands, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Lithuania, Canada and Ukraine, with international activity coordinated by Europol and [Eurojust](#).

The law enforcement agency was able to take over at least 700 servers used as part of the Emotet botnet’s infrastructure. The FBI collected millions of email addresses used by Emotet operators in their malware campaigns as part of the cleanup operation.

The Emotet banking trojan [has been active](#) at least since 2014, the botnet is operated by a threat actor tracked as [TA542](#). The infamous banking trojan was also used to deliver other malicious code, such as [Trickbot](#) and [QBot](#) trojans, or ransomware such as [Conti](#), [ProLock](#), [Ryuk](#), and [Egregor](#).

In mid-November researchers from multiple cybersecurity firms ([Cryptolaemus], [GData], and [Advanced Intel]) reported that threat actors are using the [TrickBot](#) malware to drop an Emotet loader on infected devices. The experts tracked the campaign aimed at rebuilding the Emotet botnet using TrickBot’s infrastructure as Operation Reacharound.

Researchers from AdvIntel [believe](#) that the return will have a significant impact on the ransomware operations in the threat landscape, likely “the largest threat ecosystem shift in 2021” and beyond due to three reasons:

1. *Emotet’s unmatched continuous loader capabilities*
2. *The correlation between these capabilities and the demanded of the contemporary cybercrime market*
3. *The return of the TrickBot-Emotet-Ransomware triad resulted from the first two points.*

The Emotet botnet was resurrected by its former operator, who was convinced by the Conti ransomware gang. The shutdown of the Emotet operation resulted in the lack of high-quality initial access brokers. Qbot and TrickBot used Emotet’s service to deploy multiple ransomware strains, including [Conti](#), [DoppelPaymer](#), [Egregor](#), [ProLock](#), [Ryuk](#), and others).

The vacuum left by Emotet shutdown urged its resurgence, for this reason, its return will have a major impact on the threat landscape.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Review of ransomware landscape
SOURCE	https://www.zerofox.com/blog/ransomware-landscape/?web_view=true

From May to October 2021, the ZeroFox Threat Intelligence team has observed the changing ransomware landscape with new, current, and evolved threats. As new threats emerged, current threats persisted or evolved to include novel capabilities and techniques. Among new threats included the discovery of Colossus ransomware by ZeroFox Threat Intelligence and new ransomware families based on old ransomware with a history of success. One of the most active ransomware groups since 2019, REvil was responsible for large-scale attacks on organizations around the world including the Kaseya supply chain attack. In this blog, we'll outline some of the key findings from the latest Ransomware Landscape Report.

Six-Month Ransomware Activity: New and Continued Threats

New Threats on the Ransomware Landscape

Between May and October 2021, new ransomware variants emerged on the threat landscape that involved novel, rebranded, and new ransomware based on existing variants. Three examples of prevalent ransomware from each group during this six-month time frame included LockBit 2.0, Colossus, and BlackMatter ransomware. All three variants are Ransomware-as-a-Service tools that use evolved ransomware extortion schemes.

Notable Past and Current Ransomware Landscape Threats

The six month time period discussed in the [Ransomware Landscape Report](#) notes a few ransomware groups that were either new to the scene in 2021 or continued their past efforts. One group, Babuk ransomware, was first discovered in early January 2021. In its early days, victim leaks and updates from the actors were posted on underground criminal forums before they launched a data leak website. After the first researchers began to publish their analysis of the ransomware, Babuk representative biba99 made a large post to Raid Forums to "express our great gratitude to all security researchers that they are studying our product..." The post then goes on to describe Babuk as "non malicious, specialized software, created with the purpose to show the security issues inside the corporate networks."

Conti is another major ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) group that has been active since mid-2020. An [alert published by the Cyber Security & Infrastructure Agency \(CISA\)](#) in September 2021 noted the group typically gains access to a network in several different ways. Spearphishing campaigns, which are more targeted phishing attacks, are often used with malicious attachments or links to execute scripts or download other malware to assist in the attack. Stolen credentials are also often used to gain access through services like Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) that have been exposed directly to the Internet. 2021 saw many vulnerabilities used by ransomware groups as well. Conti was observed using the PrintNightmare (CVE-2021-34527) and Zerologon (CVE-2020-1472) vulnerabilities.

Repeat Ransomware Offenders

As ZeroFox Research observed earlier this year, an interesting trend seems to be emerging in the ransomware landscape. Some victims are being attacked multiple times. ZeroFox Research has uncovered three victims at the time that were compromised two or more times in the span of the same month.

As we asserted at the time, there has been an increase in ransomware actors revisiting the same victims on multiple occasions, and since that time that percentage of attacks has increased. Our belief at the time that the Grief Ransomware group was a rebranding of the DoppelPaymer threat group has since been confirmed.

Rebranding and derivative actions also continue to contribute to the scale of the number of actors returning to the well of earlier success with the emergence of actors like LockBit 2.0 rising from LockBit, BlackMatter showing ties to LockBit, REvil, and DarkSide, and Payload.bin and Babuk2.0 both deriving from the former Babuk team. But review of the activities of the new derivative and rebranded groups continue to follow the trend of attacking the same victims at a similar rate of the broad-view statistics for victims being attacked multiple times.

Conclusion

Ransomware once more proves to be a persistent threat to businesses and individuals. Between May and October 2021, the ransomware landscape exhibited significant activity that demonstrates how threat actors quickly adapt to an evolving market. The emergence of new, updated, and rebranded families highlights

	how ransomware operators shift from one RaaS to another due to improved capabilities and lucrative opportunities. Meanwhile, as threats like Babuk discontinued operations, the Conti group continues to thrive and target any organization that falls victim to their attacks. Learn more about these and other top ransomware landscape trends, including international government response and cybercriminal network activity by downloading the full Ransomware Landscape Report .
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HEADLINE	12/07 CIA reveals: deep into cryptocurrency
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyp7vw/the-cia-is-deep-into-cryptocurrency-director-reveals
GIST	<p>There's a long-running conspiracy theory among a small number of cryptocurrency enthusiasts that Bitcoin's anonymous inventor, Satoshi Nakamoto, was actually the CIA or another three-lettered agency. That fringe theory is having a fresh day in the sun after CIA Director William Burns said on Monday that the intelligence agency has "a number of different projects focused on cryptocurrency" on the go.</p> <p>Burns made his comments at the tail end of a talk at the Wall Street Journal's CEO Summit. After discussing everything from the possible Russian invasion of Ukraine to the challenges of space, someone in the audience asked if the agency is on top of cryptocurrencies, which are currently at the center of the ransomware epidemic that U.S. officials are attempting to get a handle on and stamp out. Here's what Burns said:</p> <p>"This is something I inherited. My predecessor had started this, but had set in motion a number of different projects focused on cryptocurrency and trying to look at second- and third-order consequences as well and helping with our colleagues in other parts of the U.S. government to provide solid intelligence on what we're seeing as well."</p> <p>This is hardly surprising given the focus ransomware is getting from every corner of government. This year, a ransomware attack targeting a pipeline company led to a shutdown, panic buying, and a gas shortage in several states.</p> <p>Cryptocurrencies "could have enormous impact on everything from ransomware attacks, as you mentioned, because one of the ways of getting at ransomware attacks and deterring them is to be able to get at the financial networks that so many of those criminal networks use and that gets right at the issue of digital currencies as well," Burns said.</p> <p>Crypto-Twitter had a field day with Burns' comments, with varying degrees of seriousness, which proliferated via—what else?—a tweet from the frequently apocalyptic, "Tyler Durden"-authored blog ZeroHedge.</p> <p>"damm the CIA made Bitcoin smh. Pack it up it's over," said one tweet. Another tweet by crypto influencer Crypto Cobain jokingly ranked crypto projects by their likelihood to be CIA plants. (Most likely memecoin? SafeMoon.)</p> <p>Some posters even took the opportunity to say that even if Bitcoin was a CIA plant, it wouldn't matter. "If it came out (and was proven) that Bitcoin was created by the CIA, it wouldn't significantly diminish my bullishness. The only thing it would change is my view of Satoshi. But, crucially, Satoshi is not Bitcoin. That connection was severed years ago," tweeted Spencer Schiff, who is a Bitcoin promoter and the son of stock broker and anti-crypto advocate Peter Schiff.</p> <p>Of course, (almost) everyone is just having a bit of fun with the joke that the CIA created Bitcoin. But the CIA itself seems pretty serious about its current activities in the crypto space, which no doubt reflects how troublesome ransomware attacks and the like have become.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Amazon Web Services outage
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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/07/amazon-web-services-outage-hits-sites-and-apps-such-as-imdb-and-tinder
GIST	<p>Several Amazon services – including its website, Prime Video and applications that use Amazon Web Services (AWS) – went down for thousands of users on Tuesday.</p> <p>Amazon said the outage was probably due to problems related to application programming interface (API), which is a set of protocols for building and integrating application software, Reuters reported.</p> <p>“We are experiencing API and console issues in the US-East-1 Region,” Amazon said in a report on its service health dashboard, adding that it had identified the cause. By late afternoon the outage appeared to be partially resolved, with the company saying that it was “working towards full recovery”.</p> <p>“With the network device issues resolved, we are now working towards recovery of any impaired services,” the company said on the dashboard.</p> <p>Downdetector showed more than 24,000 incidents of people reporting problems with Amazon. It tracks outages by collating status reports from a number of sources, including user-submitted errors on its platform.</p> <p>The outage was also affecting delivery operations. Amazon’s warehouse operation use AWS and experienced disruptions, spokesperson Richard Rocha told the Washington Post. A Washington state Amazon driver said his facility had been “at a standstill” since Tuesday morning, CNBC reported.</p> <p>Other services, including Amazon’s Ring security cameras, mobile banking app Chime and robot vacuum cleaner maker iRobot were also facing difficulties, according to their social media pages.</p> <p>Ring said it was aware of the issue and working to resolve it. “A major Amazon Web Services (AWS) outage is currently impacting our iRobot Home App,” iRobot said on its website.</p> <p>Other websites and apps affected include the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), language learning provider Duolingo and dating site Tinder, according to Downdetector.</p> <p>The outage also affected presale tickets for Adele’s upcoming performances in Las Vegas. “Due to an Amazon Web Services (AWS) outage impacting companies globally, all Adele Verified Fan Presales scheduled for today have been moved to tomorrow to ensure a better experience,” Ticketmaster said on Twitter.</p> <p>In June, websites including the Guardian, Reddit, Amazon, CNN, PayPal, Spotify, Al Jazeera Media Network and the New York Times were hit by a widespread hour-long outage linked to US-based content delivery network provider Fastly Inc, a smaller rival of AWS.</p> <p>In July, Amazon experienced a disruption in its online stores service, which lasted for nearly two hours and affected more than 38,000 users.</p> <p>Users have experienced 27 outages over the past 12 months on Amazon, according to the web tool reviewing website ToolTester.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Ransom victims pay extra extortion fees
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/ransomware-victims-pay-700k-extra/
GIST	<p>A staggering 96% of ransomware victims that agree to their extortioners’ demands are subsequently forced to pay additional fees amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to CrowdStrike.</p> <p>The security vendor’s 2021 CrowdStrike Global Security Attitude Survey was compiled from interviews with 2200 senior IT and cybersecurity decision makers in the US, EMEA and APAC.</p>

It found that two-thirds (66%) of respondents had suffered at least one ransomware attack over the past year, with average payments increasing 63% over the year. They were lowest on average in EMEA (\$1.3m), followed by the US (\$1.6m), and highest in APAC (\$2.4m).

The average demand from ransomware groups was \$6m. CrowdStrike claimed the gulf between this figure and what victims end up paying is due to organizations getting better at negotiating and understanding their risk exposure.

However, threat actors are seeking to recoup funds in other ways — most notably in extorting the same victims more than once for the same attack. The report claimed that on average these extra payments cost victims \$792,493.

“One of the biggest mistakes that a company that falls victim to a ransomware attack can do, is believe that paying the ransom will make all your problems disappear,” CrowdStrike’s EMEA CTO, Zeki Turedi, told Infosecurity.

“What most organizations are completely unaware of, is that not only paying the ransom will more than likely result in another attack in the future, it leaves them in the situation of still needing to fully recover from a catastrophic event as well as further fuelling the cyber-criminal system.”

Turedi claimed organizations would be better off spending money on improving protective measures.

However, here too the report found widespread failures. On average, respondents estimated it would take 146 hours to detect a cybersecurity incident, up from 117 hours in 2020.

Once detected, it takes organizations a further 11 hours to triage, investigate and understand a security incident and 16 hours to contain and remediate one.

Some 69% of respondents said they suffered an incident because of staff working remotely.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Google disrupted massive botnet Glupteba
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/07/google-glupteba-botnet-hack/
GIST	<p>Google is suing two Russia-based individuals it alleges are behind a massive network of infected computers that have been used for crimes ranging from the theft of personal information to secretly mining bitcoin on the computers of unsuspecting hacking victims.</p> <p>The company also worked with Internet infrastructure companies to take down servers used by hackers to control the network, effectively rendering the “botnet” of infected devices unable to receive new commands from their controllers, at least temporarily.</p> <p>The move comes a day after Microsoft said it had taken down websites associated with what it believed was a China-based hacking group that stole personal information. Companies such as Microsoft and Google, which see huge swaths of the Internet pass through their systems each day, are increasingly investigating and trying to disrupt hackers, a practice that in the past has mostly been the domain of government law enforcement agencies.</p> <p>The Glupteba botnet that Google targeted has been tracked by law enforcement and computer security experts for years. It works by tricking users into downloading malware onto their computers by masquerading as other kinds of software on dodgy free-download sites. Once on a computer, the malware hides itself and tries to spread to any connected devices, according to a 2020 report on Glupteba by cybersecurity firm SophosLabs.</p> <p>Google found that Glupteba has infected about a million Microsoft Windows devices worldwide, which would put it among the largest botnets analyzed by security experts. In a complaint filed in federal court in</p>

New York on Tuesday, Google detailed several different crimes it alleges hackers use the botnet to perpetuate, including stealing and selling log-in information for Google accounts, and selling access to captured devices to other criminals who want to hide their Internet activity.

The hackers used Google's own services to distribute the malware. Google took down approximately 63 million Google Docs, more than 1,000 Google accounts and over 900 Google Cloud projects that were being used to spread Glupteba, the company said.

"We don't just plug security holes, we work to eliminate entire classes of threats for consumers and businesses whose work depends on the Internet," Google general counsel Halimah DeLaine Prado and Royal Hansen, vice president of engineering, said in a blog post Tuesday.

The company warned, however, that Glupteba could return to operation soon, because the hackers who designed it have incorporated a fail-safe mechanism that uses the bitcoin blockchain to issue commands. When communication between the botnet and its hacker controllers is cut off, the network will automatically look for messages telling it how to reconnect that are posted by the hackers on the publicly accessible list of bitcoin transactions.

"This action will have a significant impact on Glupteba's operations," Shane Huntley, the director of Google's Threat Analysis Group, said in a separate blog post. "However, the operators of Glupteba are likely to attempt to regain control of the botnet using a backup command and control mechanism that uses data encoded on the Bitcoin blockchain."

Google's lawsuit names two people — Dmitry Starovikov and Alexander Filippov — who it alleges are among the leaders who control the Glupteba network. Both men set up Google email accounts on the same IP address used by a server that sent commands to the botnet, Google said in its court filing. The company also alleges it tied Starovikov's and Filippov's Google accounts to some of the websites selling stolen access to the computers on the botnet.

The details in the lawsuit show how Google can leverage the fact that most people who use the Internet interact with its services to track down people it believes are breaking its terms of service or committing crimes.

Google also alleged that Filippov and some of the websites that it linked to the botnet list their business address as being in the Russian Federation Tower, a high-end skyscraper complex in Moscow. On Monday, the New York Times reported that cybercrime investigators have traced other kinds of criminal hacking organizations to the same address.

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HEADLINE	12/08 Tech firm a ransomware front group?
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/this-small-tech-company-spiffytech-may-actually-be-a-ransomware-front-group?ref=home
GIST	<p>It seems innocent enough: a little-known Canadian company that offers an array of tech and consulting services. But a certificate from that company—a sort of signature that can be tacked onto malware—showed up in two pieces of ransomware last month and leading experts told The Daily Beast they believe the small company is actually a front for at least two Russian ransomware gangs.</p> <p>The company—cheerily named “SpiffyTech”—has a number of red flags. For one, if you want to look at SpiffyTech’s leadership team, you’re out of luck. They don’t exist.</p> <p>The site does list four top staffers next to their stylish headshots. But the SpiffyTech operators appear to have stolen each and every photo.</p>

A reverse image search on Google shows the headshots come from a professional photographer's website. The photographer, Kirill Tigai, confirmed the photos in question were part of a shoot for a different company and said he did not give SpiffyTech permission to use them.

"I think... this website SpiffyTech is a fraud," Tigai told The Daily Beast. "They just use photos that I made for my clients under different names."

Another reason experts believe "SpiffyTech" is a front is far more technical.

Hackers frequently steal certificates from actual businesses in order to help their attacks fly under the radar and trick computers into thinking their malware is legitimate. And while it's possible the hackers did the same here—or tricked a real company into sharing a legitimate "cert"—the shadiness of the site, and its apparent connection to ransomware, leads cybersecurity analysts to believe SpiffyTech is a disguise for something more sinister.

"It's possible that cert could have been stolen," said Allan Liska, an intelligence analyst at Recorded Future. "But then when you start looking at the company itself and realizing that they're not real, then it starts to get suspicious."

The way the certs have been used likewise suggests SpiffyTech is up to no good. The only use of the certs known to date are exclusively in malware, Juan Andrés Guerrero-Saade, principal threat researcher at SentinelOne, told The Daily Beast. He came to this conclusion from analyzing files on VirusTotal, a repository security pros use to check if files are malicious or benign.

DigiCert, the authority that issued the certificate, told The Daily Beast it has revoked it since the company's terms don't allow for illegal activity, like ransomware, which could indicate DigiCert deems the operators aren't legit.

Efforts to contact SpiffyTech went unanswered—emails bounced back and the phone is disconnected.

House of Mirrors

It's not entirely clear who is behind the site or company, and the ownership appears to get shuffled around quite a bit. A man named Daniel Stanfill of Texas has been listed as the site's owner, according to domain registration information. But other owners through the years have cropped up, including an India-based company, Moksha Designs Pvt Ltd and, more recently, a Canadian company, K3P Consulting, according to WHOIS records.

Stanfill confirmed he has indeed owned the site—and he said he was under the impression he hadn't let others buy the domain, and thought he still was in control of it. Stanfill told The Daily Beast he doesn't know what SpiffyTech is.

"I haven't really tried to do anything but let it sit since I retired... That was my business website," Stanfill said, adding that the site had been idle for years. "It could be somebody that is using the website sort of by proxy... it may have been maliciously gotten ahold of."

According to the latest records, the site is registered to K3P. But attempts to reach K3P failed. GoDaddy, the registrar for the site, declined to comment about who really owns the site.

The mystery continues from there.

Canadian government records show a man named Diltaj Singh Jatana runs SpiffyTech. Jatana claims on his LinkedIn to work for a construction company, RB Excavating. And SpiffyTech and RB Excavating both claim the same address, according to government records. According to Google Maps, however, the address isn't an office or even an office building; it's a house.

There are some signs more recent ownership of the site may be linked—almost all of the more recent names were added to the records on the same date in January of 2016, according to WHOIS records. In other words, it's possible that whoever controls the site now could have planned for it to look like the site was changing hands, when it really wasn't, analysts said, in order to mask their involvement.

"In that case the person either changed the information in the WHOIS record but the ownership itself didn't change," said Alexandre Francois, threat researcher at WhoisXML API, adding that it's still possible the site really did change hands.

But through the years, an actual transfer of the site ownership was prohibited, according to WHOIS records.

Attempts to reach the manager of Moksha Designs Pvt Ltd, Satish Reddy, and Jatana went unanswered. The FBI did not return requests for comment. Canadian law enforcement and the Canada Revenue Agency declined to comment.

Ransomware Groups

The two ransomware groups connected to SpiffyTech are Hive and BlackMatter, as the SpiffyTech cert was buried in two pieces of their ransomware last month, analysts told The Daily Beast.

By using a company that's been registered so many times, these analysts said the hackers involved in Hive and BlackMatter could be trying to stump law enforcement or trick the certificate authority into approving them without a second glance.

"One of the things that some malicious actors like to do is... use domain names that have a long history of being registered," Liska said. "They like having domains that have been around for a while because it shows it basically can [give] some confusion" and send investigations into a tailspin.

The identities of ransomware hackers are notoriously difficult to unearth. Sometimes investigations into the individuals behind attacks take years, and ransomware gangs are constantly splintering and regrouping, making tracing them even trickier.

BlackMatter itself has announced it had merged together several ransomware gangs, including DarkSide and REvil—the same gangs the U.S. government has been trying to catch red-handed for months after their attacks hit Colonial Pipeline, meat supplier JBS, and thousands of other companies. The U.S. government wants to nail them down so badly the [State Department](#) announced it's offering [\\$10 million](#) for information that leads to their identities.

It wouldn't be the first time hackers used a front company to gain a semblance of legitimacy. A hacking gang called FIN7 has used [multiple front companies](#) to recruit hackers before, while another group has relied on a [fake company](#) in Italy.

Hive and BlackMatter don't have a known history of working together, cybersecurity analysts told The Daily Beast. But researchers said what's more likely is that an affiliate hacker, who happens to work for both gangs, was looking for a way to hide their operations and hijacked a company domain name that's changed hands so many times that authorities wouldn't bat an eye.

Hive and BlackMatter—both of which began earlier this year to attack targets, including hospitals—are believed to have affiliates, according to an [FBI alert](#) and an alert from the Department of Homeland Security.

Greg Otto, a security researcher at Intel471, said it was a distinct possibility affiliates were swapping notes.

	“The affiliate networks for ransomware as a service... don’t operate in vacuums,” Otto told The Daily Beast. “Because this has repeated across different variants, it shows that either the people working for the affiliates [are] talking with one another, or that affiliates are working for different gangs.”
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/08 Afghans wait, worry at US bases
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/new-jersey-kabul-fd5db486fd3e990f95484f167a87529c
GIST	<p>JOINT BASE MCGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST, N.J. (AP) — The former interpreter for the U.S. Army counts himself among the lucky as an Afghan who managed to make it through frantic crowds outside the Kabul airport to board a military evacuation flight out of the country with little more than the clothes on his back.</p> <p>Esrar Ahmad Saber now waits, along with 11,000 other Afghans, from the safety of a U.S. base in central New Jersey, while worrying about family members left behind and enduring a prolonged resettlement process.</p> <p>Saber has been at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in central New Jersey since Aug. 26 as has nearly everyone else at one of the three “villages” set up there for refugees. “They want to go to their new homes and start their new lives,” the 29-year-old said. “They are really excited about it. But the fact is, the process is very slow.”</p> <p>The slow pace has become a defining characteristic of Operation Allies Welcome, the largest U.S. refugee resettlement effort in decades. Even as Afghans still arrive, thousands remain in limbo, anxious about their future as they fearfully follow the news of Taliban reprisals and economic collapse back in their homeland.</p> <p>Operation Allies Welcome reached a milestone this week as the number resettled in American communities — 37,000 — surpassed the 35,000 at six bases around the country. But people involved with the effort readily concede it’s been a challenge for a number of reasons, including a scarcity of affordable housing, cutbacks to refugee programs under Trump as well as the sheer number of refugees.</p> <p>“It’s been a shock to the system because we just haven’t had this many people arrive at the same time in a really, really long period,” said Erol Kekic, a senior vice president with Church World Service, one of nine national resettlement agencies working with the government in what is formally known as Operation Allies Welcome.</p> <p>The resettlement organizations and the Department of Homeland Security, the lead federal agency in the effort, are working toward a goal of having everyone off the bases by Feb. 15. The New Jersey installation now hosts the largest number, down from a high of 14,500, followed by Fort McCoy in Wisconsin with 7,500.</p> <p>There are 3,200 more at overseas transit points awaiting flights to the U.S. as well as some still making it out of Afghanistan.</p> <p>“I feel pretty good about our chances of moving everybody off the base before that day,” Kekic said. “Whether or not we get there by Feb. 15, I think remains to be seen.”</p> <p>The government last week conducted a guided tour for journalists of the New Jersey installation, where refugees stay in brick buildings previously used as barracks or in sprawling tent-like prefabricated structures.</p>

There are fields for soccer, courts for basketball and cavernous warehouses where refugees receive clothes and other supplies. There are also classrooms for the children, who make up about 40% of the population, as well as language lessons and job training for adults and a medical clinic.

Afghans staying at the base go through immigration processing as well as health screening and vaccinations, including for COVID-19. More than 100 babies have been born to women at the base.

Saber, who came from Afghanistan by himself and left a brother and sister behind, says the refugees are happy, just eager to move on. “It’s a dream to be here. They just want to get out as soon as possible.”

Among the refugees are new arrivals as well. Ghulam Eshan Sharifi, a microbiologist, came on Nov. 14 with his wife and two children after 23 days in Qatar. He was relieved but worried about his adult daughters back in Kabul who held government jobs before the Taliban returned.

“They have no jobs now. They cannot even go outside so we are obviously afraid about what will happen to them,” Sharifi said. “We are hoping that God will solve the problem.”

He said he hopes to settle in the Denver area but does not yet know when, or if, that will happen. “This is just the beginning for us,” he added.

Many refugees are also recovering from what was for many a traumatic escape from a country that collapsed much more quickly than the U.S. government, at least publicly, anticipated.

“Most, if not all of them have worked with our forces and they have been part of the U.S. effort in some way,” said Air Force Col. Soleiman Rahel, who came to the U.S. with his family as a refugee from Afghanistan when he was a teenager and is on a temporary assignment working with the refugees at the base. “So, it’s very traumatic. It’s very hard for them.”

Rahel said he can appreciate the challenges the new arrivals will face since his own parents confronted similar ones, including being forced to take lower-level jobs than they were accustomed to back in Afghanistan so they could support their family and the kids could go to school.

He also can understand why so many of the refugees want to move to areas where there are established Afghan communities — particularly Northern California, the Washington, D.C., area and Houston — even though those requests are straining resettlement efforts there and contributing to the delays.

Given the extent of the challenge, the agencies have enlisted help beyond groups that typically work with refugees, including veterans groups and even local sports clubs to sponsor families to help them get situated. Resettlement officials say it might have been easier if the entire process had been shifted to a U.S. territory such as Guam, which has been used for that purpose in the past, or if there had been more time to prepare in advance for their arrival.

“This thing should have been planned before they announced the withdrawal. Right? So in that sense, it is taking longer than it should,” Mark Hetfield, president of HIAS, another of the nine resettlement organizations, said. “But considering they decided to plan for this after they made the decision to withdraw, given that the depletion of the capacity of the U.S. refugee program over the last four years, none of this is surprising.”

While refugees receive temporary assistance after being resettled, most are expected to achieve self-sufficiency. That proves to be difficult when many don’t speak English well, have academic credentials that won’t be recognized in the U.S. and lack the job and credit history needed.

Saber said he hopes his experience as a military interpreter will allow him to join the Army. He recently learned that he would be getting resettled in Phoenix, but has no idea when he’ll leave. “I’m just waiting for a flight.”

HEADLINE	12/08 Indonesia jails militant for life; 2005 attack
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/indonesian-militant-given-life-sentence-in-2005-attack/
GIST	<p>JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — An Indonesian court sentenced an Islamic militant who eluded capture for 16 years to life in prison on Wednesday after finding him guilty of making bombs used in a 2005 market attack that killed 22 people.</p> <p>Upik Lawanga, known as “professor,” is a key member of the Jemaah Islamiyah militant network, which the U.S. has designated a terrorist group. It is widely blamed for attacks including the 2002 bombings on the Indonesian resort island of Bali that killed 202 people, mostly foreign tourists, as well as attacks in the Philippines.</p> <p>The East Jakarta District Court found Lawanga, 43, guilty of involvement in the May 28, 2005, attack at Tentena market in Poso district which killed 22 people and injured 91 others, mostly Christians. Muslim-Christian conflicts in Poso in Central Sulawesi province killed at least 1,000 people from 1998 to 2002.</p> <p>Lawanga was also accused of building bombs used in a 2004 passenger minibus attack that killed six people and a 2006 attack using a flashlight bomb that killed a Christian woman.</p> <p>“What the defendant has done was a crime against humanity that left deep wounds, trauma and sorrow for the families of the victims,” said Presiding Judge Sutikna, who goes by a single name.</p> <p>Lawanga said he would appeal the decision. He argued in court that he helped make the bombs but did not carry out the attacks, saying he did not know how they would be used. He said he was only obeying orders from other senior members of the group to assemble bombs to avenge Christians for the massacre of Muslims at an Islamic boarding school during sectarian conflict in May 2000.</p> <p>He said his motive was the deaths of relatives and friends in the Muslim-Christian conflict and the burning of mosques and his brother’s house.</p> <p>Other militants testified that Lawanga was nicknamed the “professor” because of his ability to build bombs and firearms. They described him as an important figure because of his expertise.</p> <p>Lawanga said he joined Jemaah Islamiyah in Poso in 2002 and learned how to assemble bombs from Azahari bin Husin, a Malaysian bomb-making mastermind who was killed in a police raid in Indonesia in 2005.</p> <p>Lawanga left Poso after the 2005 attacks and lived with his wife and children in Lampung as a duck farmer.</p> <p>The trial began early September and was held remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>Lawanga, whose real name is Taufiq Bulaga, became one of the country’s most wanted militants after being named as a suspect in the Tentena market attack. He was arrested last year in the same southern town on Sumatra island where Zulkarnaen, believed to be the military leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah network, was arrested by counterterrorism police a week later. Zulkarnaen had been on the police wanted list for 18 years.</p> <p>Police, who learned of their hideout after interrogating several militants arrested earlier, found a bunker at Lawanga’s house with handmade guns and explosive materials.</p> <p>The two were tried separately at the same court.</p> <p>An Indonesian court banned Jemaah Islamiyah in 2008, and a sustained crackdown by security forces with support from the U.S. and Australia helped weaken the militant network.</p>

	<p>Militant attacks on foreigners in Indonesia have largely been replaced in recent years by smaller, less deadly strikes targeting the government, mainly police and security forces, inspired by Islamic State group tactics abroad.</p> <p>Indonesia's police counterterrorism unit, known as Densus 88, has arrested more than 500 suspected Jemaah Islamiyah members in the past two years, including a member of the Indonesia Ulema Council, the country's highest Islamic body, who was arrested last month.</p> <p>Authorities estimate the group has more than 6,000 members.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 DOJ: seizures of Iran fuel, weapons
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/doj/united-states-prevails-in-actions-to-seize-and-forfeit-iranian-terror-groups-missiles-and-petroleum/
GIST	<p>The Justice Department today announced the successful forfeiture of two large caches of Iranian arms, including 171 surface-to-air missiles and eight anti-tank missiles, as well as approximately 1.1 million barrels of Iranian petroleum products. The U.S. Navy seized the weapons from two vessels in the Arabian Sea while conducting routine maritime security operations. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a designated foreign terrorist organization, orchestrated the arms shipments, which were destined for Houthi militants in Yemen. The U.S. government similarly seized the Iranian petroleum products from four foreign-flagged tankers in or around the Arabian Sea while en route to Venezuela. These actions represent the government's largest-ever forfeitures of fuel and weapons shipments from Iran.</p> <p>The U.S. government sold the seized petroleum products pursuant to a court order. The net proceeds of that sale, \$26,681,397.67 before interest, may be directed, in whole or in part, to the U.S. Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Fund now that the case has concluded.</p> <p>"The actions of the United States in these two cases strike a resounding blow to the Government of Iran and to the criminal networks supporting Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department's National Security Division. "The Department of Justice will continue to use all available tools to combat the threats posed by terrorist organizations and all those who seek to harm the United States and its allies."</p> <p>"These two cases demonstrate that not only can we disrupt the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' ability to finance its operations through petroleum sales, but we can also thwart its ability to use the proceeds of such sales to arm its terrorist proxies and export terrorism abroad," said U.S. Attorney Matthew M. Graves for the District of Columbia. "Given our expertise and special statutory authority, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia is uniquely positioned to support its law enforcement partners in such terrorism cases. We are deeply committed to this mission."</p> <p>"The combined efforts of the FBI and our partners to seize missiles and over a million barrels of petroleum demonstrate our commitment to defend against foreign terrorist organizations and enforce U.S. sanctions," said Assistant Director Alan E. Kohler Jr. of the FBI's Counterintelligence Division. "The Government of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism has left innocent victims in its wake and its attempts to support regimes dangerous to the United States and our allies will be met with the full force of the law. The FBI has a continued resolve to hold the Government of Iran accountable for its illegal actions, and we urge anyone with information about violations of sanctions on Iran to contact the FBI."</p> <p>"This case is a success because of the hard work and dedication of a joint agency team including agents, analysts and prosecutors who, by securing illegal petroleum, have helped curtail Iran's campaign of violence and unrest throughout the Middle East," said Special Agent in Charge Michael Paul of the FBI's Minneapolis Field Office.</p> <p>"The results announced today by the Department of Justice represent another significant victory for HSI in its ongoing efforts to thwart the nefarious criminal activities of the Iranian regime and Iran's Islamic</p>

Revolutionary Guard Corps,” said Special Agent in Charge Ray Villanueva of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Washington. “Protecting our homeland from transnational threats of any kind remains a top priority for HSI. The actions conducted by HSI and our partner organizations, both at home and abroad, demonstrate that no matter where in the world Iran attempts to violate sanctions and arm dangerous entities, HSI stands ready to disrupt their activities and defend the national security of the United States.”

“The illegal transfer of Iranian-made weapons poses a significant and immediate threat to our national security,” said Director Kelly P. Mayo of the Department of Defense, Office of the Inspector General’s criminal investigative arm, the Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS). “The judgement announced today is an important step in our efforts to identify, disrupt, and bring to justice those who imperil resources vital to our safety.”

U.S. Navy Central Command (NAVCENT) seized the weapons from two flagless vessels in the Arabian Sea on Nov. 25, 2019, and Feb. 9, 2020, respectively. The weapons included 171 guided anti-tank missiles, eight surface-to-air missiles, land attack cruise missile components, anti-ship cruise missile components, thermal weapons optics and other components for missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles.

On Aug. 20, 2020, the Justice Department filed a complaint seeking to forfeit the seized weapons in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The complaint alleged that the arms shipments were part of an IRGC trafficking network designed to distribute illicit weapons to the Houthi movement in Yemen. The court granted the government’s motion for default judgment and entered a final order of forfeiture on Nov. 15. In its opinion, the court found that the government had adequately alleged that the weapons belonged to the IRGC and that the IRGC constitutes an entity engaged in planning or perpetrating a federal crime of terrorism against the United States.

On July 2, 2020, the United States also filed a complaint in the District of Columbia seeking to forfeit all petroleum-product cargo aboard four foreign-flagged oil tankers. The complaint alleged that the petroleum originated in Iran, and the sale of that petroleum benefitted the IRGC, a sanctioned Iranian entity. On Oct. 1, 2021, the court granted the government’s motion for default judgment and entered an order of forfeiture. In its opinion, the court found that the United States had sufficiently alleged that the petroleum products provided a source of influence over the IRGC because those properties were critical to furthering the affairs of the terrorist group’s enterprise.

These successful forfeiture actions are a product of the U.S. government’s coordinated efforts to enforce U.S. sanctions against the IRGC and the Iranian regime.

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HEADLINE	12/07 ISIS ‘global presence continues to grow’
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/terrorism-study/isis-global-presence-continues-to-grow-as-terror-groups-prove-resilient-and-adaptive/
GIST	<p>Innovative counterterrorism measures including counter-messaging and capacity-building within strong international partnerships are critical to confront “a terrorist threat landscape that is more dynamic, complex, and fast-moving than ever before,” a top State Department official told Congress.</p> <p>ISIS and al-Qaeda “have proven to be resilient and determined, responding to increased counterterrorism pressure by adapting their tactics and techniques,” Acting Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism Christopher Landberg told the House Oversight and Reform National Security Subcommittee this morning during a hearing on the worldwide threat from foreign terrorist organizations.</p> <p>“ISIS’s global presence continues to grow despite the liberation of territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria,” Landberg said in prepared remarks. “ISIS is leveraging its branches and networks across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa to advance its agenda. ISIS’s affiliates are increasing the volume and lethality of their attacks, particularly in West and Central Africa, causing more fatalities by ISIS affiliates in Africa in 2020 than in any previous year.”</p>

Al-Qaeda's branches, particularly al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Shabaab, continue "to pose a serious threat" with operatives "quite capable of inflicting damage on our allies and on our global interests."

"AQ's networks continue to exploit local grievances in under-governed spaces, conflict zones, and security gaps in the Middle East and Africa to acquire resources and conduct terrorist attacks," he added. "This remains the case despite the significant losses of leadership and degraded capacity to execute large-scale attacks that AQ has suffered."

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism Milancy Harris told lawmakers that "while we have significantly degraded the terrorist threat with the last 20 years of sustained pressure, we still face a potent challenge."

"The terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland from externally directed attacks is at the lowest since 9/11, but we still face a number of terrorist groups committed to targeting U.S. interests and personnel abroad," she said. "These groups seek to take advantage of instability and ungoverned spaces and have a new and evolving set of tools readily available. Today's terrorist groups are proficient with new technologies, agile in the information environment, creative in circumventing traditional financial systems, and remain ideologically influential enough to motivate new generations of people to join them or conduct independent attacks on their behalf."

Harris said the most effective counterterrorism approach is usually "a mix of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities and working with our partners and allies," including "using our education and capacity-building programs to help develop increased counterterrorism capacity in critical regions, and ensuring our security cooperation efforts integrate with other complementary U.S. government programs."

Since U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Harris said DoD is working to "process the lessons learned" and "set the conditions for a new counterterrorism mission" that seeks to leverage intelligence, diplomacy, and military capabilities while monitoring terrorism developments in the country.

"Any approach will not be static; we will continue to iterate and adjust based on the terrorist threat and what will keep America safe," she said.

Landberg said his department's focus includes "bolstering the professionalism and capability of partner nations' law enforcement to identify, deter, prevent, disrupt, apprehend, investigate, prosecute, and convict terrorists and their supporters, including through support for key regional and multilateral institutions and global initiatives."

Activities include working with partner nations on the repatriation of foreign terrorist fighters and their families, working with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with a particular focus "beyond Iraq and Syria to include ISIS threats in Africa and elsewhere" as well as "reminding our partners that [al-Qaeda] remains capable and dangerous," and exploring new partnership opportunities with other nations to detect and stop terrorist cross-border movements. In terms of international sanctions, the State Department "will continue to assess how we can use these tools to restrict terrorist organizations and leaders."

"Amid this diverse and dynamic threat landscape, the path forward to countering terrorism around the world must be one marked by continued diplomacy, dialogue, and diligence," Landberg stressed. "Despite the complexities and challenges of countering terrorism around the world, we must remain vigilant and proactive in protecting the United States and our allies and promoting U.S. national security interests."

Landberg told lawmakers that sharp counter-messaging — seen as "long-term resistance" to terrorists' online presence — is critical as terrorism propaganda and recruitment materials continue to propagate in cyberspace.

	<p>Pressed by some lawmakers about the Taliban's current relationship with longtime allies al-Qaeda, the State Department official said he could discuss that in closed session. "We've been very clear with the Taliban on numerous occasions" about U.S. counterterrorism expectations, Landberg said.</p> <p>"They are aware of our clear message that they cannot allow al-Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a safe haven and I think they're wary of allowing al-Qaeda to do that," he said.</p> <p>Harris said being able to ascertain a clear picture of what's happening in Afghanistan through diplomatic and intelligence channels in lieu of boots on the ground is "better than it was three months ago" and is expected to improve.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Israel completes wall along Gaza border
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211208-israel-completes-wall-along-gaza-border
GIST	<p>Israel on Tuesday announced the completion of an enhanced security barrier along its border with the besieged Gaza Strip.</p> <p>The structure includes and underground wall equipped with sensors to prevent militants from using tunnels.</p> <p>It also includes improvements to an existing above-ground fence, a naval barrier, radar systems, and command and control rooms.</p> <p>It will provide "Israeli citizens a sense of security," Defense Minister Benny Gantz said.</p> <p>Around 220,000 trucks of concrete and 140,000 tons of iron and steel were used during construction.</p> <p>Gantz says the "iron wall", stretching 65-kilometers (40-miles), will be a barrier "between the terror organization and the residents of Israel's south."</p> <p>Israel Wants to Keep Hamas Out The Defense Ministry did not say exactly how deep the barrier went underground.</p> <p>Plans for the barrier were first announced in 2016 to stop attacks by the Palestinian militant group Hamas.</p> <p>Israel, the European Union, and the United States classify Hamas as a terrorist organization.</p> <p>Israel has fought 4 wars with the group since it seized power in Gaza in 2007, most recently in May. Hamas used a sophisticated tunnel system, during the fighting, to try and get fighters into Israel but failed.</p> <p>They were more successful during fighting in 2014 when fighters entered Israeli territory several times.</p> <p>Gaza Surrounded Israel and Egypt are tightly restricting the flow of goods and people in and out of the territory. Aid organizations say some 2 million people live in very poor conditions.</p> <p>In 2018 and 2019, Hamas organized violent mass protests along the border to pressure Israel to ease the blockade.</p> <p>More than 200 Palestinians and an Israeli soldier were killed and thousands of Palestinians were wounded.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Niger state fearful as jihadists gain foothold
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/nigeria-niger-state-jihadists-boko-haram-abuja-banditry

“They ordered everyone to come around, saying if you run, if you cry, you will die,” said Bala Pada, recalling the moment in April when jihadists rounded up people at a market in his home town of Kaure to witness the execution of two alleged vigilantes.

Hundreds of jihadists have settled over the past year in Kaure and other remote communities in Niger state in [Nigeria](#), according to displaced residents and local government officials. They began to arrive in November 2020, hoisting flags and declaring the communities under their control.

“They said this is what will happen to anyone that tries to stop them,” Pada said from a classroom in the Central primary school in Gwada, where he, his family and about 400 others displaced by violence now live. “Everyone was made to watch it but no one was allowed to react at all or they would face the same fate as the vigilantes,” the 45-year-old said. “Then they sprayed them with bullets.”

Fighters from competing Islamist terror groups linked to Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province have gained a foothold across Niger state by easily displacing [an often feeble government or security presence](#). The development has caused increasing concern in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, just over three hours by road from towns and villages where jihadist flags fly and other armed groups have settled.

Residents and local officials have for years and with growing desperation raised the alarm about [the domination of armed groups – called bandits – in much of Niger state](#). The arrival of jihadists in this often ungoverned space has made the situation more complicated, and even more dangerous.

Many of the jihadists arrived from Nigeria’s north-east, where they were engaged in fighting with the Nigerian army. They have found a haven in and around the same mineral-rich forests of the north-west that provided a fertile breeding ground for bandit gangs.

The militants in Niger state have terrorised communities by carrying out public executions, abducting young girls to be “wives”, forcibly recruiting young boys to be child soldiers, and decreeing that state schools close.

Alarmed officials in the state have pleaded for military reinforcements. They say their warnings are being acknowledged at the federal level but go largely unheeded.

“The problem is that insecurity is everywhere in the country,” said Suleiman Chukuba, the chairman of the Shiroro local government area. From his office in the state capital, Minna, he explained how Shiroro, one of the worst-affected areas in Niger state, had been left without adequate help. “We really need more manpower in the army, and better weapons,” Chukuba said, echoing sentiments expressed across the country [that areas suffering violence have been abandoned by the central government](#).

Swathes of Niger state were already being subjected to what was in effect an insurgency waged by heavily armed bandit gangs before the jihadists turned up. The bandit gangs are made up of various ethnic groups, but dominated by mostly young ethnic Fulanis. Many of the Fulani armed groups have emerged from historic and complex conflicts over land between largely Fulani herders and farmers from other ethnic groups. In recent years these conflicts have worsened dramatically, killing thousands and becoming the most pronounced of the many security threats facing Nigeria.

The bandit groups have overpowered local police and army units, killing civilians and prolifically carrying out [kidnaps for ransom](#) – especially targeting school students – from the dense forests that span north-west Nigeria and stretch into the Sahel.

The ransom money has bolstered the bandits’ capabilities, said Chukuba. “They have general purpose machine guns, they have AK47s, they have ammunition,” he said. “They are at times better armed than the army.”

The bandit crisis created a vacuum of governance and security into which the jihadists have stepped. Twelve of Shiroro's 15 wards have been overrun by armed groups, and jihadists are thought to be at large in at least five. Other local government areas in Niger state such as Rafi have been similarly affected.

"Two weeks ago they [jihadists] went to Korebe," Chukuba said of a ward in Shiroro. "They saw a girl less than 14 and they kidnapped her and took her to their camp in the forest. Then they came back to the parents, to the father, with their arms, and they said, 'we want to marry her and we're here to pay the dowry.'"

In another incident, a seven-year-old boy was taken. "Again they went back to the parents and said, 'don't worry the boy is with us. We're going to teach him the Islamic way of living'," Chukuba said. "It's a very desperate situation. They '[the jihadists] come to you and tell you 'we have your child and they're carrying weapons'. People are living in a state of fear."

Chukuba said 70% of Shiroro's school are no longer operational either because of kidnappings by bandit groups or decrees from jihadists forbidding education.

In some areas the jihadists are positioning themselves to locals as being able to offer a more reliable protection from banditry than the government. "What we're seeing is them coming in and preaching to people that they are on their side," Chukuba said.

But in others, the jihadist and bandit causes have aligned. Gambo Isiaku, the headteacher of the Central primary school in Gwada, said school kidnappings were increasingly an area where alliances were being formed. "The bandits get what they want which is ransom money and so they kidnap the children, while Boko Haram get what they want which is an end to western education."

As the insecurity worsens, accounts of acts of terror have multiplied.

According to Isiaku, people across Shiroro have reported armed groups and jihadists committing mass rapes of women and girls in front of their families. "It's so bad, it's hard to even imagine," he said.

In a briefing to journalists last week, a secretary to the Niger state governor said jihadists were setting up a caliphate in the state, and lamented that there were just 8,000 police officers trying to protect the state's population of roughly 4 million people.

In recent days the army has told people in several communities in Shiroro and other areas in Niger state to leave their homes before a possible impending military offensive. Yet in a largely impoverished state, where many people rely on their farmland for food and income, leaving means abandoning livelihoods.

Pada now does odd manual labour jobs in the area close to the school to make ends meet. He was born and grew up in Kaure, but cannot return, he said. "We want to go back home but we don't have a choice."

Chukuba described Shiroro as a peaceful place before the violence that has reshaped it.

A day after explaining what had befallen residents in his jurisdiction, he learned his brother and other members of his family has been abducted by a bandit group. "They recently told all those living in the town to leave, but he was staying there because he didn't want to abandon our farm," he said over the telephone. "Inshallah [God willing], we will be able to rescue them."

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HEADLINE	12/07 Taliban fighters man urban checkpoints
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-fighters-now-manning-checkpoints-afghan-cities-81617676

GIST	<p>HERAT, Afghanistan -- Since the Taliban took over Afghanistan more than three and a half months ago amid a chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops, their fighters have changed roles, from insurgents fighting in the mountains and fields to an armed force running the country.</p> <p>Many Taliban foot soldiers now have new jobs: manning checkpoints on the streets and carrying out security patrols in and around Afghan cities and towns. Last month, several Taliban fighters posed for portrait photographs for The Associated Press on nighttime patrols and at checkpoints in the western city of Herat.</p> <p>One of them, 21-year-old Ahmad Wali, was on patrol in the village of Kamar Kalagh, north of Herat. A student in an Islamic religious school known as a madrassa, he said he joined the Taliban because he believed in the teachings of the Quran and was against the American presence in his country and against the previous Afghan government, which was widely criticized for corruption.</p> <p>Now, he said, he is very busy with his new responsibilities providing security in the area he was assigned to. He hopes both he and his country will have a bright future, and said he was “99% sure” better days will come for all people in Afghanistan.</p> <p>After the Taliban takeover in mid-August, Afghanistan’s already dilapidated and aid-dependent economy careened into full-blown crisis. The international community has withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in financing that the country of 38 million people relied on. Billions of dollars in Afghan assets abroad have been frozen.</p> <p>Afghanistan’s banking system has been largely cut off from the world, and the new Taliban rulers have been largely unable to pay salaries, while jobs across the economy have disappeared.</p> <p>Women have been mostly barred from the job market, except in certain professions, and from a high school education, while tens of thousands of people, including highly educated professionals, have fled or are trying to flee Afghanistan, leading to a massive brain drain.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Pensacola terror attack survivors speak out
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/survivors-pensacola-terror-attack-speak/story?id=81591538
GIST	<p>Two years after the Pensacola air base terror attack, Navy veteran George Johnson, 27, can still remember the moment he came face-to-face with Saudi Arabian Air Force officer Mohammed Alshamrani, who shot and killed three and injured eight others.</p> <p>"I looked him dead in the eye. He looks into the office and passes me, doesn't say a word, but a smirk," Johnson recalled.</p> <p>During the early morning hours of Dec. 6, 2019, Alshamrani walked into a pilot training school at the Pensacola Naval Base and opened fire.</p> <p>The first shots were fired at the watch station at the training school in building 633. Sailors Kaleb Watson, 23, and Cameron Walters, 21, were killed while standing guard.</p> <p>Later, Alshamrani shot and killed 19-year-old sailor Mohammed Haitham, who had confronted the shooter.</p> <p>Alshamrani, 21, was a Saudi Arabian Air Force Officer training at the U.S. Navy base in Florida.</p> <p>He was a part of a pilot training program where Saudi officers and other foreign pilots were learning how to fly American fighter jets on the base. The program was tied to billions of dollars in U.S. arms sales to the country.</p> <p>Secretly, Alshamrani had pledged allegiance to terrorist group Al Qaeda.</p>

	<p>Following the shooting, Saudi Arabia condemned the attack, extended its condolences and pledged cooperation with the U.S. In a statement, they said the "perpetrator of this heinous crime does not represent the Saudi people, who count the American people as friends and allies."</p> <p>But the victims and their families are now suing the kingdom, alleging it either knew or should have known about Alshamrani's terrorist ties.</p> <p>"It makes me so angry. America has been betrayed," said Navy veteran Jessica Pickett, a mother of four, who was shot nine times by Alshamrani.</p> <p>Like Pickett, Johnson was also inside the pilot training building that morning, when Alshamrani arrived. After the first shots were fired, he said he hid underneath his desk and prayed.</p> <p>"In my wallet, there was a metal card that my mom gave me right before I went to boot camp and it had a message on it wishing me good luck and safe return," Johnson said.</p> <p>Little did his mother know that the metal card would later save her son's life. Alshamrani shot Johnson seven times and a bullet that likely would have killed him was stopped by the precious keepsake.</p> <p>"She had no idea," he said. "This was my armor."</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/07 Explosion Pacific Co. destroys buildings
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/explosion-pacific-county-damages-multiple-homes-buildings/N6AP4CKURRECFJO42QMB6UA6J4/
GIST	<p>PACIFIC COUNTY, Wash. — Crews responded to an explosion early Tuesday that damaged multiple buildings and homes in Pacific County.</p> <p>At approximately 1:30 a.m., fire crews were dispatched to an explosion in Surfside in the area of 305th and N Place.</p> <p>When crews arrived, they found a large garage-type building that had exploded and caught fire. Multiple other structures in the area were also seriously damaged.</p> <p>Fire crews were able to contain the fire to only the building where it started and had it fully under control by 1:50 a.m.</p> <p>No injuries were reported, but there were multiple reports of buildings, including several occupied homes, damaged more than three blocks away from the site of the explosion.</p> <p>Fire crews will be going door-to-door in the neighborhood to determine the complete level of damage. The Pacific County Department of Community Development has also been requested to perform structural safety assessments in the area.</p> <p>The cause of the explosion is currently under investigation. Authorities request people avoid the area until they can complete a full assessment.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/08 Climate crisis: golf courses borrowed time
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/08/golf/climate-change-sustainability-spt-intl-cmd/index.html

(CNN)The 30 or so [golf](#) courses in the Salt Lake County of Utah drink up around nine million gallons of water a day to stay pristine green -- that's more than 13 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Managing the turf on [golf](#) courses also means using carbon-intensive fertilizers, plenty of mowing and, in many cases, clearing forests or trees that were soaking up carbon-dioxide to make way for long tracts of fairway.

In other words, [golf](#) is a dirty sport that's wrecking the planet. But it doesn't have to be.

The impact of golf on the climate and environment has led to growing calls to make the sport more sustainable -- even to play on bone-dry courses, as golfing legend [Tiger Woods](#) has enjoyed.

And it's not just to save the planet, but to save the sport itself, as the climate crisis threatens to transform many courses into muddy swamps.

The president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA), Jason Straka, told [CNN Sport](#) how the climate crisis has been affecting golf in flood-threatened Florida, and in Ohio and Utah, which have been hit by warmer-than-usual weather and even drought.

"Clubs never used to have to close after two-inch rain, now they do. They also experience sunny day flooding," said Straka.

In Miami, authorities are raising public drains to a minimum of 3.4 feet, but more than 50% of courses in the city are under this minimum, which rings alarm bells for Straka.

"If they don't go out and literally lift their footprint up in the air, they're going to be in a perpetually deeper and deeper bathtub," he said.

"If they think they have problems now, in 10 years, they're going to be a swamp."

But change will equate to cost, which is where golf's critics find their voice once more: courses are just not sustainable anymore.

While courses in the eastern US are being threatened by changing rainfall patterns, deadly wildfires that ripped through the west, including in California, have led to poor air quality and course closures in recent years.

Less stark, but by no means less worrying, are rising temperatures in Ohio, which are being infested with Bermuda grass, a warmer-season grass that can be difficult to control.

Rain, fire, floods and ice

The situation in Australia is similar: Lynwood Country Club, northwest of Sydney, was flooded in 2020 and again earlier this year. At one stage, parts of the course were over 26 feet under water, while up the New South Wales coastline, Nambucca Heads received 42.5 inches of rainfall in just eight days.

On the same eastern coast, some 350 miles south of Sydney in the state of Victoria, Mallacoota Golf Club very nearly perished during the bushfires of 2019 and 2020, the fairways providing a sanctuary for townsfolk. Club Catalina, further up the NSW coast, broke the firewall that threatened to wipe out the town.

But in a country accustomed to regular wildfires, courses are adapting by trying to capture water when rain is heavy for use in course irrigation, or even to put out fires.

"Golf courses in Australia, by and large, all have some sort of irrigation storage which are very useful for fighting fires," Society of Australian Golf Course Architects (SAGCA) President Harley Kruse told CNN Sport, echoing Straka's comments on future forecasts.

"Last year in Sydney, there was a 1-in-100-years flood event. We're going to get an increase of various storm events which could be wind, rain, cyclone or we get a greater increase in drought events. Golf courses need to be flexible and more understanding."

Fellow Australian Tim Lobb, President of the European Institute of Golf Course Architects (EIGCA), is promoting naturalization and grass reduction in Turkey to decrease water usage -- 15-20% of the area that was fine turf will use a lower-maintenance grass species.

In cooler regions, coastal courses around the British Isles face a very uncertain future -- none more so than the world's fifth-oldest layout in Montrose, a few miles up the coast from major championship venue Carnoustie, where in the last 30 years, the sea has encroached by almost 230 feet (70 meters) in places, according to research released in 2016.

With sea levels projected to rise by one meter in the next 50 years, the home of golf at St. Andrews in Scotland could be a swamp like Miami as early as 2050.

Over in [Iceland](#), Edwin Roald, renowned Icelandic architect and founder of Eureka Golf -- a company "committed to mitigating climate change through golf" -- told CNN how greater frequency of water freezing and thawing cycles in colder Northern Hemisphere climates is becoming a real danger to courses.

"We have a lot of issues with frozen water [...] and a lot of flash flooding, repeatedly throughout the winter. It's allowing that to happen without the water eroding the land.

"Winter kill, through the turf's suffocation under ice cover, is a greater threat and increasing. This causes financial damage to courses that are opening in spring with dead turf."

Solar panels and robotic mowers

At the COP26 summit in the Scottish city of Glasgow, the North Berwick-based environmentalist GEO Foundation for Sustainable Golf showed a virtual audience how golf is learning to be a champion among sporting bodies for a greener planet.

Woburn, the host course for the 2019 Women's British Open, constructed its own reservoir in 2013 to capture rainwater to irrigate its turf, and more recently drilled a borehole to tap water from underground. The company managing the course says the new infrastructure should make Woburn fully self-sufficient, so it isn't using water that could be otherwise used for drinking and in homes.

While at Remuera Golf Club in Auckland, carbon-dioxide (CO₂) emissions were reduced by nearly 25 tons from 2018-19, through the cutting of all electricity use at the club.

Finland's Hirsala Golf aims to have 40 robotic mowers running on electricity that can be sourced from renewable sources by 2022, cutting the usage of 1,000 liters of diesel fuel, while solar panels at Golf de Payerne in Switzerland have saved 1,080 tons of CO₂.

Back in Iceland, the country is measuring the carbon status of all of its 65 golf courses through the Carbon Par project -- the first golfing nation to produce such an account.

"The method that is being used to produce this estimate, hopefully, others can use that going forward. To improve, you first have to know where you stand," said Roald.

"Golf courses are sequestering a considerable amount of carbon, which I think few people actually associate with golf. On the flipside, golf is a large land user and bound to be using wetlands in places. Emissions when you drain wetlands are so great."

Forests, peatlands, deserts and tundra can all absorb and hold stocks of CO₂. Of all the carbon held in land-based ecosystems, around 34% can be found in grasslands, data from the World Resources Institute

shows. That's not much less than the 39% held in forests. So whether a golf course might actually soak up a good amount of carbon-dioxide depends on how it's managed and whether it destroys more valuable land to begin with.

Roald added: "It's only a matter of time before the golf industry will be asked questions about what we can do with those wetlands -- that's where we can have the most impact."

Climate change clamor has caught the eye of one of golf's most recognizable voices in Rory McIlroy, just one of many high-profile athletes who travel enormous distances by plane.

"I wouldn't self-profess to be an eco-warrior, but I'm someone that doesn't want to damage the environment," the Florida-based Northern Irishman told the media at the DP World Tour Championship in Dubai.

"I live in a part of the world where hurricanes are very prevalent and becoming more and more prevalent as the years go on. I think we can all play our part in some way or another.

"We play on big pieces of land that take up a lot of water and a lot of other things that could maybe be put to better use."

'The way golf should be played'

Ahead of a trip to the world-renowned Royal Melbourne in Australia, Kruse referenced comments in 2019 by Tiger Woods and Ernie Els at the Presidents Cup.

Cutting to the chase, both players spoke highly of the course's natural setup -- in essence, much like many past Open Championships, the course was dry and vast areas of the rough and even fairways had gone without water, "letting Mother Nature dish up the elements to play the game," said Kruse.

Well-watered and manicured golf courses can often provide softer conditions which produce better scoring and prettier TV images, but Els and Woods took the chance to laud another approach which will become the norm as courses seek sustainable practices.

Els and Woods both talked up the advantages of playing on a dried-out course, like in Australia.

Kruse said he could barely believe his eyes when he saw a team of maintenance staff on TV earlier this year using petrol-driven leaf blowers to dry the rough, adding American courses probably have more sprinkler heads per golf course and water more area of turf compared to courses in, for example, Australia or the British Isles.

"Taking the drought in California a few years ago, I would hope that they haven't gone back to their old ways and they're having a rethink," Kruse said.

"You don't need 2,000 irrigation heads right from fence line to fence line to keep the course alive. You can let things dry out."

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HEADLINE	12/07 Wildlife officials to feed Florida manatees
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/12/07/manatees-florida-feeding-program/
GIST	<p>WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — A record manatee die-off in Florida this year has become so dire that federal officials are taking a once unthinkable step — feeding the wild marine mammals to help them survive the winter.</p> <p>More than 1,000 manatees, about 15 percent of the state's total population, have died this year. But even with a supplemental feeding program — delivering heads of lettuce and cabbage as the manatees gather</p>

in their traditional warm-water wintering spots — biologists predict that hundreds more of the iconic species are likely to perish.

Manatees rely mainly on seagrass, [beds of which have been smothered](#) by pollutants along with outbreaks of toxic algae blooms [intensified by climate change](#).

“They’re having a very hard time finding food,” said Patrick Rose, executive director of the Save the Manatee Club. “The majority are quite malnourished.”

A subspecies of the West Indian manatee, Florida manatees were among the first animals to be listed as an [endangered species](#) by the federal government in 1967. Numbers [had dipped to about 1,000](#) when Rose and other biologists began a public campaign to save the manatee.

Since then, the manatees have become Florida celebrities. The Florida legislature designated the manatee the state’s official marine mammal; it appears on nearly 50,000 specialty license plates; hundreds of miles of waterways have no-wake zones to slow down boats and guard against collisions with the animals; and manatee observation decks built around power plants attract thousands of tourists every winter. Nearly 40,000 manatees have been “adopted” through the Save the Manatee Club, which was founded in 1981 by singer Jimmy Buffet and then-Gov. Bob Graham (D), who went on to become a U.S. senator.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will target an area south of the Kennedy Space Center on the state’s central Atlantic coast: the Indian River Lagoon, where more than 500 manatees have died this year. The problem is especially acute in the northern Indian River Lagoon, where roughly 96 percent of 77,000 acres of seagrass have disappeared.

Manatees flock to the warm water discharged by power plants like the one at Indian River because they don’t survive in water colder than 68 degrees. Historically, they spend winters near springs in Florida where the water temperature doesn’t dip below 68 degrees.

“The question is, how do we get them through this winter?” Rose said. “Because there’s no reasonable amount of food available for them within the vicinity of the power plant where they go this time of year to stay warm. So they have this miserable choice between staying warm and forgoing food, or go out and try to find it and essentially die of cold stress.”

While boat strikes have ranked as the main cause of death among Florida manatees, starvation has outpaced boating accidents this year.

The plan approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service would allow limited feeding in the Indian River Lagoon. Rose and others have been asking for permission to feed the animals since early in the year, when emaciated manatees began showing up around the state.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials declined to comment on the plan, which they will announce on Wednesday. At that point, they will outline several key details, including how food will be delivered to manatees without any human interaction. It remains illegal for members of the public to feed the marine mammals.

Manatees can weigh up to 1,200 pounds and measure as long as 14 feet. Rose said the animals need to eat about 10 percent of their body weight every day, and many have been trying to survive on algae. They’ve also been seen trying to propel themselves so they can eat grass on land along canal banks.

“They’re grazing on any low mangrove leaves they can find, and if there’s a lawn somewhere near where they happen to be in a canal system, they’re trying to eat grass off the bank,” Rose said. “They are struggling.”

Beth Brady, a manatee researcher at the Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, said the feeding program could help save the lives of malnourished and emaciated manatees and guide future recovery efforts.

"I think it's a good idea," Brady said. "This is a man-made problem, and it's not going to go away quickly. It will be nice to supplement them at least a little bit. This experiment is important to see how manatees are going to respond."

After decades of recovery efforts, the number of manatees in Florida waters reached an estimated 6,620 in 2017, and federal scientists projected they would survive there for another 100 years. That same year, the Trump administration shifted the manatee from an endangered to a threatened species, over the objections of many biologists and environmentalists.

"That signaled to people that the manatee was on the path to recovery, and that it doesn't need all the help that it once did," said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director of the Center for Biological Diversity, an advocacy group. "That was done in spite of significant opposition from the conservation community that predicted this type of catastrophe. We had waterways that were in crisis as result of water pollution. So the down-listing in 2017 was premature. And here we are, four years later, and we lost 20 percent of the Atlantic population in just one season."

The popularity of manatees may help push policymakers to act, Lopez said, but they must move soon.

"You look at a manatee, and it's like you're looking at a golden retriever; it looks familiar, it feels safe. They really are just gentle giants," Lopez said. "But when they're starving, and you can see their bones, you shouldn't be able to see their bones. They're supposed to be chubby, not emaciated."

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HEADLINE	12/07 Going forward: Japan's first WWII POW
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-hid-its-pearl-harbor-pow-he-survived-and-left-a-tale-of-resilience-11638871200?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>TOKUSHIMA, Japan—Nobuo Matsubara still remembers the visit to his home by a naval officer in January 1942. The officer told the family that Nobuo's older brother, Kazuo, had been killed fighting for Japan in the attack on Pearl Harbor.</p> <p>It wasn't true. But the truth was even worse, under the values of the time. Kazuo had been captured in Hawaii—the first Japanese serviceman taken prisoner by the Americans. To neighbors and other navy men, it was shameful. To the government, it was impossible: Gen. Hideki Tojo's military code ordered his men to fight to the death.</p> <p>Eighty years after the Pearl Harbor attack on Dec. 7, 1941, the story of Japan's first POW is kept alive by his brother, who is 88. The story raises questions that come up in every war, such as how far the duty of a soldier extends and what kind of treatment is due the enemy.</p> <p>What President Franklin D. Roosevelt called "a date which will live in infamy" is remembered for the Japanese bombers that attacked U.S. Navy ships. But in a lesser-known adjunct to the air raid, Japan also sent five two-man midget submarines to Pearl Harbor in the hopes of torpedoing U.S. warships.</p> <p>One carried Ensign Kazuo Sakamaki. He was the second son of parents who had 11 children including little Nobuo, who later took his wife's family name, Matsubara.</p> <p>A few hours before the bomber raid began Sunday morning, Mr. Sakamaki's midget sub was launched from its mother submarine 10 miles off Pearl Harbor.</p> <p>Mr. Sakamaki recalled in a 1949 memoir the parade of disasters that followed. His submarine tumbled flailing into the water, its gyrocompass already broken. By the time the craft was righted, it was off course,</p>

and the men had to approach Pearl Harbor virtually blindly, occasionally poking the periscope above the surface to check their course. Then Mr. Sakamaki was knocked unconscious by a shock wave as depth charges exploded nearby. Even an attempt at a suicide attack failed because the men couldn't reach a U.S. warship to ram.

By early Monday, the submarine was stuck on a reef and the men had to abandon ship. Mr. Sakamaki wrote that he jumped into the sea and after a while lost touch with his comrade, who would be found drowned. Later that morning, Mr. Sakamaki found himself on Waimanalo Beach in Oahu, where two American soldiers grabbed his arms and led him away.

Back in Tokushima prefecture, Nobuo heard the news of Pearl Harbor and never dreamed his brother was involved. After initially saying Kazuo was dead, the navy sent a higher-ranking officer to confide that the ensign was missing. The family was ordered to keep it a secret.

On March 6, the Imperial Headquarters announced the names of nine men who died in the submarine attack at Pearl Harbor. The Japanese media praised them as "hero gods." But it didn't add up to young Nobuo. "Nine people for five boats. It seemed odd to both adults and children," he recalled. He began to suspect there was a 10th man no one wanted to talk about—his brother.

Jo Toyoda, a Naval Academy classmate of Kazuo, wrote in a 1977 memoir that classmates knew one of their own was a POW. Mr. Toyoda recalled some saying things like, "That Sakamaki idiot ought to kill himself. If he sticks around, he'll be the shame of our class."

Mr. Sakamaki at first felt the same way. He recalled telling his interrogator in Honolulu, "Shoot and kill me in front of the burning Arizona!"

Instead, the U.S. held him for a few months in Hawaii before transferring him to POW camps on the mainland.

It was a time when hatred of Japan ran high.

At a private gathering of old naval comrades in 1986, Mr. Sakamaki said it was still too sensitive to report on his experiences. He mentioned that he had planned to testify at the Tokyo Trials in defense of Japanese soldiers accused of abusing American POWs—presumably to make the case that Americans abused Japanese POWs as well—but was stopped by the judge because it would pose an international issue.

In 1989, Kyodo News published an article about a copy of an American report on treatment of Japanese POWs. It said the report recorded an incident on Christmas Eve in 1941 in which someone in Honolulu sent coffee to Mr. Sakamaki and a Japanese woman detained in a cell next to him. The report cited Mr. Sakamaki as saying that he recognized it as a trap, but the woman was stricken and a doctor was called in. The outcome of her case wasn't known, and Mr. Sakamaki declined to comment to Kyodo.

Mr. Sakamaki wrote more about his time as a POW on the mainland. Seeing the trains passing by his camp carrying vast stores of modern weapons, he began to realize how foolish his country had been. Arriving as a nationalist who wanted only to die for Imperial Japan, he decided to live out the war and became a POW camp leader who looked after the other prisoners.

Perhaps the harshest treatment he spoke of came around the time of the war's end at Camp Kenedy in Texas. Mr. Toyoda, the classmate, was a POW at the same camp. The commander held a grudge because he had been demoted over the Pearl Harbor attack, and he put the two men in scorpion-infested cells, Mr. Toyoda recalled. Mr. Sakamaki mentioned the episode in his 1986 speech, saying he had little food for days.

Early in 1946, Mr. Sakamaki was repatriated to Japan. He later described receiving a letter telling him to commit ritual suicide, but Nobuo also remembers that neighbors welcomed him home. Curious people

	<p>lined up to see the miraculously returned ensign. His father greeted the visitors while Kazuo stayed in the shadows.</p> <p>“For several years afterward, I had the feeling that I had to stay one step back” because of the lingering stigma or indignity associated with POWs, recalls Nobuo. “Our friends and neighbors sincerely said, ‘It was good he came back alive,’ but all we could say was ‘Thank you very much.’ We couldn’t say, ‘We are happy,’ because many people died in the war.”</p> <p>Kazuo put his memories into two books written in the four years after the war but rarely spoke to his family or anyone else about being a POW. He went into a career in business, eventually rising to head a Toyota Motor Corp. subsidiary in Brazil. He died at the age of 81 in 1999.</p> <p>Nobuo became a world-history teacher. Now retired, he lives in Tokushima city. He is the last survivor of the 11 siblings and lives not far from the place where that naval officer came 80 years ago. The old house was torn down last year.</p> <p>He believes the tale of a POW who was ready to die but made a productive life instead is worth retelling. “It’s one example of how you have to go forward and make an effort to build peace, knowing how humanity is precious,” Nobuo says.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/07 WSP: debris tossed at I-5 motorists
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/state-patrol-investigating-reports-of-debris-thrown-at-passing-vehicles-on-i-5-in-downtown
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The Washington State Patrol confirmed Tuesday to KOMO News that it is investigating reports that debris was thrown at passing motorists traveling on Interstate 5 between Seneca and Mercer streets near the Washington State Convention Center complex.</p> <p>New reports of debris being thrown at passing I-5 motorists follows similar incidents that occurred last summer on I-90 during which several vehicles ended up with busted windshields from rocks and blocks of concrete that was thrown at them.</p> <p>No injuries were reported from the most recent incident, which was reported Sunday around 1:45 p.m. in the northbound lanes of I-5 near an area where there is a large amount of debris from a mini encampment that has been located in the area.</p> <p>Scott and Ashley Newman of Shoreline said their car was not hit but they saw two cars in front of them swerve to avoid being struck by debris.</p> <p>And that was before they saw a toaster oven thrown at a mid-sized vehicle.</p> <p>"I was thinking, 'Oh, everything is going to be fine,'" said Scott Newman, who was driving his pregnant wife and three kids down I-5. "It's funny (because) as soon as I thought that this large thing that looked like a toaster oven came out of nowhere (and it) hit) that car on top, broke into two pieces and split off."</p> <p>Newman said the driver of the vehicle that was struck by the appliance continued driving.</p> <p>"I don't think they realized what happened," he said. "I'm sure they'll see some weird damage when they get home."</p>

The patrol said troopers were dispatched to the scene but were unable to find anyone, including a man who was reported as holding a broom handle and standing in the area just above I-5.

Ashley Newman reported seeing a tall, think guy holding a broom handle or rod.

"I don't know if he was going to start chucking that," Scott Newman said.

KOMO News saw a damaged toaster on the side of I-5 Tuesday and showed it to the couple, and they said it was probable that was the appliance that was hurled in traffic.

A post in the Safe Seattle Facebook group first raised the issue of I-5 motorists being targeted again by items.

The poster said the man from Sunday's incident was likely standing on a side street that runs along I-5 under the Convention Center but no one was able to provide an exact location where the suspect may have been.

One of the occupants inside the vehicle that narrowly avoided being struck by thrown debris, said she was 7 months pregnant.

"Quite scary," she posted.

The incident echoes similar incidents that were reported in June and July in which dozens of motorists were targeted on I-90 near the Mount Baker Tunnel and on I-5 near I-90 from people staying at a nearby encampment. The State Patrol ended up asking for the public's help to catch the people who were tossing items at drivers.

Those attacks prompted officials to evict residents from the nearby encampment, and one man was taken into custody after he was identified and chased by a passing motorist whose vehicle had been targeted. That pursuit was caught on a traffic camera posted in the area.

Anyone with information about the most recent incident on Sunday was asked to call 911 or the State Patrol.

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HEADLINE	12/07 NCBF bails out man for assaulting a cop
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3268131/rantz-seattle-activists-bail-out-homeless-suspect-in-brutal-eye-gouging-of-cop/
GIST	<p>Tyler Martin is a homeless, prolific offender accused of gouging a Seattle officer's eye in a brutal assault. And it's not the first time Martin has attacked a police officer.</p> <p>Martin was allegedly breaking out a window at the Ballard Health Club in Seattle. When an officer arrived, police documents say Martin resisted after retreating into an alleyway. He asked the officer if he wanted to be "curb stomped," according to charging documents. Then, prosecutors allege, Martin ran at the officer to attack.</p> <p>During the scuffle, the report says Martin "jammed his finger into [the officer's] left eye, gouging the eye." The report says the finger went so deep into the officer's eye socket that Martin's "palm pushed up against [the officer's] face." It caused considerable damage.</p> <p>But the 27-year-old suspect has friends in an anti-bail, abolitionist activist group that continues to put the city at risk. It has come to light that the Northwest Community Bail Fund (NCBF) paid Martin's bail.</p> <p>A quick release, then back to jail</p>

Martin was charged with one count of assault in the third degree for the Sept. 8 incident.

The attack left the officer with lacerations around the eye and hemorrhaging in the eye. He had to see an eye specialist to confirm there would be no long-term damage.

The King County Prosecutor's Office asked for \$25,000 in bail during the first appearance, arguing Martin "is substantially likely to commit a violent offense." But Judge Kuljinder K. Dhillon lowered the case to \$1,000, paving the way for him to be bailed out.

The NCBF then stepped in to help. It's a revelation that came to light during research for a different story — one that has plenty of officers livid.

Northwest Community Bail Fund pays for suspect's release
On Oct. 28, the NCBF [paid Martin's \\$1,000 bail](#).

It's unclear why the group chose to bail out Martin. The NCBF did not respond to a request for comment.

Is this the kind of person the NCBF supports? After his arraignment on assault charges, police allege he was involved in a separate crime that they had been investigating. He was charged with malicious mischief in the second degree for extensive property damage on Aug. 23, 2021.

But those details don't matter.

The [NCBF is a police and prison abolitionist group](#) that appears to bail suspects out indiscriminately. The executive director is Becky Errera.

The group opposes bail, arguing it "creates two systems of criminal justice in Washington: one for people who can afford bail, and one for people who can't."

And there are no consequences for the group's reckless activism. Via a [polished promotional video](#) on NCBF's YouTube, featuring a supporter from the ACLU of Washington, the NCBF acts as if what it does is admirable and helpful. But it puts the community in danger.

The NCBF previously bailed out a suspect accused of an assault and robbery. A month [after it bailed him out](#), the suspect allegedly stabbed a man to death.

The maddening irony

Martin shouldn't have been in a position to gouge the officer's eye in September. He was previously charged with assault for a body-check attack on Jan. 27, 2021.

In that case, officers arrived at a Ballard apartment on a domestic violence call. A gunshot had been reported. Officers attempted to evacuate residents at the address and at the homeless encampment across the street at Ballard Commons Park. Martin was living there at the time.

According to charging documents, Martin refused to leave at first. But then, he did. But in the process he allegedly "deliberately and forcefully, stepped into or 'body-checked'" an officer, knocking him to the ground.

The prosecutor's office didn't push for high bail — or any at all. It left the decision to Judge Gregg Hirakawa. He opted to release Martin on his own recognizance.

Martin failed to appear for his next hearing. His next contact with the court appears to be his eye-gouging assault. But now that he's been bailed out, will he actually make a return appearance?

HEADLINE	12/07 Oakland backtracks: seeks more police
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/oakland-decides-whether-to-add-cops-in-reversal-for-mayor/
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The Oakland City Council, a longtime leader in the Black Lives Matter movement to cut police funding, reversed course Tuesday and voted to hire more officers as it grapples with a surge in homicides and gun violence.</p> <p>The proposal by Mayor Libby Schaaf to add two new police academies and unfreeze positions within the department to add 60 new officers passed with six members voting yes, one voting no and one abstention.</p> <p>Council members ended up not voting on a separate proposal to offer one-time bonuses of at least \$50,000 to recruit experienced officers from other cities and at least \$20,000 to Oakland residents who become police cadets. They will later consider hiring incentives for experienced officers.</p> <p>Schaaf applauded the vote in a statement, saying that residents “spoke up for a comprehensive approach to public safety — one that includes prevention, intervention, and addressing crime’s root causes, as well as an adequately staffed police department.”</p> <p>Oakland is among several politically liberal cities reversing course on police funding amid a spike in violence, to the dismay of police critics who have said officers are ineffective at preventing crime and end up traumatizing residents, especially Black people. They have said there is no staffing shortage within the police department, and that officers should focus on the most serious crimes.</p> <p>“What’s terrifying about this is as Oakland goes, so goes the country,” said Cat Brooks, co-founder of Oakland’s Anti Police-Terror Project, urging the council to vote down increased police staffing. “If we allow it to be demolished here, we are giving fuel for faux progressives and right-wing folks to destroy the movement across the country.”</p> <p>Oakland has had 129 homicides this year, up from 109 last year and 78 in 2019. The deaths include a toddler who was napping in a moving vehicle when he was hit by a stray bullet on an Oakland freeway and a retired police officer who was shot while working as a security guard for a television news crew. Both killings occurred in broad daylight.</p> <p>The city’s police force of sworn officers now stands at 676, dipping below a 2014 voter-approved measure that required the police department to have at least 678 sworn officers. The city of more than 400,000 people started this year with 723 sworn officers.</p> <p>Barry Donelan, president of the Oakland Police Officers’ Association, said officers are “leaving in droves” for other cities and urged council members to thank police rather than malign them.</p> <p>Oakland has joined other cities in diverting police from some 911 calls to reduce friction between law enforcement and minority groups. A pilot program to use trained civilians to address complaints such as public intoxication and panhandling is scheduled to be launched early next year.</p> <p>With Tuesday’s vote, Oakland joins other cities with robust Black Lives Matter protests that have partially restored public safety finances in response to rising homicides, an officer exodus and political pressure.</p> <p>Last month the city council in Portland, Oregon, did an about-face on police funding after cutting the public safety budget in the midst of protests over the 2020 police murder of George Floyd. The city’s council unanimously passed a budget that increased the current \$230 million police budget by \$5.2 million.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 London rape victims damning new statistics
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SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/93bawv/most-rape-victims-in-london-drop-their-case-within-1-month-of-speaking-to-police
GIST	<p>Nearly two-thirds of people reporting a rape in London drop their complaint within a month of making it, according to damning new statistics.</p> <p>Claire Waxman, the London Victims' Commissioner, has made a number of recommendations after a study of 501 allegations found that only 6 percent result in a trial and 3 percent in conviction.</p> <p>Of those who report sexual assault or rape to the police, 64 percent dropped their report after 30 days of dealing with a police officer, up from 18 percent in a review conducted two years ago.</p> <p>Waxman says that the intrusive use of personal data on survivors' phones can deter people from continuing with the case. Victims said they felt it was disproportionate to remove their phones when they were not being investigated for a crime.</p> <p>Danielle (not her real name) is a survivor listed in the report who was raped by someone identified eight years later by a DNA sample. She says police still asked for her school and medical records, therapy notes, as well as whether she still had the same phone.</p> <p>"This felt so invasive and disturbing," she said, "as if rather than assessing the evidence gathered at the time of the rape, they were evaluating my character over my lifetime."</p> <p>The report revealed other failures when it came to rape survivors reporting their experience. According to Waxman's findings, 84 percent of victims knew their perpetrator, while only 7 percent of cases were perpetrated by a stranger.</p> <p>The average length from reporting to trial for those who didn't drop their complaint was 18 months.</p> <p>Waxman said: "This review has shone a much-needed light on some of the common misconceptions around rape – that it is a crime committed by a predatory stranger in a dark alleyway, or that if a case doesn't progress to court then it must have been a false allegation.</p> <p>"The stark reality is that all too often rape happens in the home, committed by someone known to the victim, and that accessing justice is near-impossible."</p> <p>In a statement, the Metropolitan police said: "The Met is committed to providing the best possible service to victims of rape and sexual offences."</p> <p>"We are absolutely determined to increase the number of perpetrators brought to justice by improving our processes, investigations and victim care, all the time working with partners across the criminal justice system."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Justice issues facing Native women
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/equity/2021/12/colville-mothers-conviction-raises-justice-issues-facing-native-women
GIST	<p>hen Maddesyn George of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation stood in court to be sentenced last month, her attorney hoped for two things, but the most important was this: for his client to be heard and believed.</p> <p>"The judge expressed understanding for the plight of Indigenous women," said Steve Graham, George's attorney. "We finally felt heard and listened to and understood."</p> <p>U.S. District Judge Rosanna Malouf Peterson also gave George a sentence far below the prosecution's recommendations. In her ruling, she acknowledged the uneven prosecution of the drug charges, cited the</p>

Savanna's Act and the Not Invisible Act that address the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and was critical of the prosecution's handling of George's case.

Graham believes that this wouldn't have been possible without the help he received before and during the trial from supporters and advocates, particularly people working for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Washington.

"If it weren't for all the supporters and resources that they brought to the defense, Maddesyn would no doubt be serving a standard range sentence," he said.

Early on, Graham, who is not a tribal member, reached out to Earth-Feather Sovereign, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservations and founder of [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Washington](#), for guidance in educating and directing him to resources and experts on issues specific to Indigenous women.

Moved to become involved

George's case reminded Sovereign of a case involving another enrolled citizen of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Yvonne Wanrow (now Swan) [was sentenced](#) in August 1973 of second-degree felony murder and first-degree assault for shooting an intoxicated known child molester who broke into her friend's home and was approaching her 8-year-old son after repeatedly being told to "get out."

"I, too, was threatened with decades in prison for fighting back against a white rapist," Swan said in a statement to Judge Peterson. "If she and I were affluent white women, and our rapists were Native men, would the police and prosecutors have treated us so badly?"

Sovereign was moved to become involved and reached out to George's mother, Jody George. Together, Sovereign and George's mother gathered support from advocates, organizers, and scholars who work on issues of colonial, sexual and domestic violence; policing and incarceration; and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples. Out of this support, the Free Maddesyn Coalition was established.

Swan's case reached the Washington Court of Appeals, where the justices had to decide whether Wanrow had received a fair trial after the judge restricted her ability to make a self-defense claim, similar to the debate in George's case.

Swan's case "became a powerful means of putting feminist theory into action to fight gender bias in the criminal justice system, and marked the beginning of what came to be called 'women's self-defense work,'" wrote New York University law professor Elizabeth M. Schneider in her book *Battered Women and Feminist Lawmaking*.

The bigger picture

[According to a report](#) from the National Institute of Justice, more than four out of five American Indian and Alaskan Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime, and more than one in three will be raped in their lifetime. [Washington state has the second highest number](#) of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, according to a survey by the Urban Indian Health Institute. Data from the Sovereign Bodies Institute showed that Okanogan County, the county George lives in, has had the fourth highest per capita rate of incidents of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the state since 2010.

Last month, George was sentenced to 6½ years in federal prison for voluntary manslaughter and possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute.

Her mother recalls the day that led to George's imprisonment.

"She called me when she shot him ... right after it happened" she said.

"She said, 'Mom, I think I'm going to jail.'

" 'Mom, he was going to kill me. He was coming through that window. All I could think of was Shynne. I can't leave her alone. She needs me. I shot him because he was trying to get me, he was gonna kill me mom.' "

When George was arrested, she told the Colville Tribal Police and Okanogan County Sheriff's deputies that Kristopher Graber, a white man, had raped her the day before. The police recording of George's account says that when she attempted to fight back, Graber pulled out a gun, left it in plain sight and raped her with a vibrator for 45 minutes. She was able to persuade him to stop by saying she was hungry and waited for him to fall asleep before escaping with the gun he assaulted her with, more than \$5,000 of his money and 48 grams of his methamphetamine.

The next day, Graber looked for George on the Colville reservation with a shotgun in hand, pounding on doors until someone told him where she was. When Graber found her, she was sitting in the passenger side of a car, alone. According to the account in court documents, a witness, Martin Stanley, said Graber reached in and hit George, and then she shot him. Stanley told police that George was in danger. "It don't bother him to beat the living shit out of a woman. He's known for that," he said.

Missing and murdered

Sovereign sees the violence that George experienced and the outcome as an extension of the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

"It doesn't just include when someone's reported missing or found murdered" Sovereign said. "It includes domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking. It includes sex trafficking. All these things that possibly lead to someone making a report that their daughter's missing."

Because the shooting was on the Colville reservation, U.S. law required George's case to be moved to federal court, instead of keeping it under Colville tribal jurisdiction. The Major Crimes Act removes murder, manslaughter, rape, assault with intent to kill, arson, burglary, and larceny from the crimes that tribes can adjudicate in their own communities. According to a National Institute of Justice survey, 97% of crimes committed against Native victims are committed by non-Natives.

The Major Crimes Act is one of many that interfere with the tribal justice system's ability to protect its communities by prohibiting tribal courts from trying non-Native suspects and limiting the sentencing penalty that tribal courts can impose, according to statement from Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan), professor of American Indian studies at the University of Washington.

"We find that very few cases of rape or sexual assault are paid attention to, are prosecuted, are given the resources that they need to make our women safe on our own land," said Abigail Echo-Hawk (Pawnee), the chief research officer of the Seattle Indian Health Board and director of the Urban Indian Health Institute. She led the institute's "[Our Bodies, Our Stories](#)" series of reports that exposed the scope of violence against Native women across the nation.

U.S. Attorney for Eastern Washington Vannesa Waldref and two other attorneys in her Spokane office denied that race factored into George's case, denied her self-defense claim and argued that George was lying about being raped. The U.S. Attorney's Office declined to comment to Crosscut for this story.

Devaluing Native women's bodies

Echo-Hawk sees the prosecution's actions as representative of how the federal government devalues Native women's bodies. She says that devaluation has led to Indigenous women suffering the highest rates of physical and sexual violence per capita in this nation.

"Penetration is rape," Echo-Hawk said. "Our bodies matter. Rape survivors like myself, we see it, we feel it, and goddamnit we're gonna fight it."

The prosecution also pointed to some of Graber's past romantic partners who wrote letters claiming he never was sexually inappropriate with them in any way. "They could not imagine him being sexually

inappropriate — let alone raping — anyone,” as evidence that he couldn’t have raped George, the prosecutors wrote in a sentencing memo.

At the sentencing hearing, the judge criticized the prosecution for not mentioning Graber’s ex-wife’s lifetime restraining order, which details her accounts of his strangling her and threatening to cut off her body parts and mutilating her. “He said if he couldn’t have me he was going to make sure no one else would want me,” the police report attached to the restraining order said. Among the many accounts of abuse by Graber’s ex-wife was mention of his getting aroused by beating and strangling her.

In a letter to Peterson, the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, one of the oldest sexual assault coalitions in the nation and a leader in the anti-sexual violence movement since 1979, addressed the prosecution’s “miscomprehension and disregard for some of the most basic and well-researched dynamics of sexual and interpersonal violence and survival.”

The organization also pointed out that 63% of rapes are never reported, and experience with racism and police violence make people of color even less likely to report.

According to court documents, George previously experienced police sexual misconduct and harrassment so unsettling that she moved to another town for a while.

Court documents show Okanogan County Sheriff’s Detective Isaiah Holloway coercively obtained George’s phone number and would ask her to come to hotels with him and drink, saying, “If you help me out, I’ll help you out,” according to George’s statement in September. Holloway had nothing to do with investigating the shooting of Graber, but he would have likely been the officer to respond if George had reported the rape because of how few officers work in rural Okanogan County.

Sexual assault experts call for a forensic exam by a trained sexual assault nurse examiner within 72 to 96 hours of the alleged assault to obtain physical evidence. But after hearing George’s account of the rape, and shooting, police sent George straight to Colville County Jail.

Mistrust in the system

Echo-Hawk calls the whole trial and the investigation leading up to it a complete travesty.

“Instead of making sure that there is safety on our lands for our people, for our women, the Department of Justice did the exact opposite, and produced further mistrust in the supposed justice system,” she said.

The Colville Tribal Police has not returned phone and email requests for comment.

For Indigenous supporters of George, in addition to considering her one of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, the separation from her child is a visceral reminder of America’s history of separating Indigenous children from their families.

“We now have a mother who is missing from her family, from her culture, from her community, from her loved ones, from her land, because of this travesty of justice,” Echo-Hawk said. “They have taken this mother from her child, continuing a cycle of colonial violence against Indigenous people.”

George’s mother is raising George’s daughter, Shynne, until her release. “I think right now Shynne is what gets me up every day,” said Jody George, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. The chatters and giggles of her granddaughter could be heard in the background, trying to get her grandma’s attention. “She’s been there every morning for me, making sure I get up and keeps a smile on my face.”

“It was a complete travesty to see that instead of making sure that there is safety on our lands for our people, for our women, the Department of Justice did the exact opposite, and produced further mistrust in the supposed justice system,” Echo-Hawk says.

	<p>Jody George she would continue to advocate not just for her daughter, but for all Native people who are incarcerated and treated unfairly in the courts or in jail. “I’m gonna do this for Maddesyn,” she said.</p> <p>Throughout the trial process, the coalition members became close. George was able to lean on them when things were hard and she needed someone to talk to. Judy George calls them her tribe.</p> <p>“What we’re seeing now is the love of Indigenous communities and women’s advocates and other groups coming to wrap their arms around these families,” Echo-Hawk said. “Despite all of this violence, not only have we survived, but we are thriving and we will continue to do so. It’s in our thriving that this fight for justice will never end. We will ensure that our women are safe. Five hundred years ago we were the safest people on this land, and we will be that again.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 SPD arrests 13yr-old for school threat
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3271371/seattle-teen-arrested-school-threat/
GIST	<p>Seattle police arrested a 13-year-old student for allegedly threatening to open fire on Whitman Middle School in North Seattle.</p> <p>The Seattle Police Department reports that they arrested the student at his home at 7 a.m. Tuesday. He is detained at King County Youth Services Center, pending “investigation of harassment.”</p> <p>The threat was allegedly posted on social media Dec. 5, at which time police were notified and able to verify the sender.</p> <p>The police department does not believe there to be an active threat against the school, but encourages anyone with safety concerns to contact the school administration for information related to Whitman Middle School’s safety measures and protocol.</p> <p>The arrest follows a slew of recent threats of gun violence against Puget Sound region schools. Snohomish County Sheriff’s Department arrested a 14 year old last week over threats against various schools in the Mukilteo School District. Monroe High School received a police detail Dec. 6 over similarly rumored threats.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Moscow: gunman kills 2 in services center
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/7/gunman-opens-fire-in-moscow-services-center-kills-/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AP) — A gunman opened fire in a Moscow government services center and killed two people Tuesday, reportedly after being told to put on a face mask, authorities and Russia media said. Four other people were wounded.</p> <p>Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said on Twitter that a suspect was detained. Sobyenin didn’t offer any details about the assailant or his possible motive, saying only that the incident took place in the southeast of the city.</p> <p>“Doctors are doing all they can to help those wounded,” the mayor said.</p> <p>The suspect is a 45-year-old Moscow resident, according to Russian Interior Ministry spokesperson Irina Volk. A 10-year-old girl was among the people wounded, Volk said.</p> <p>Deputy Mayor Anastasia Rakova said four people have been wounded, and three of them are in grave condition.</p> <p>State news agency Tass reported, citing an unidentified law enforcement source, that the man drew out a gun and started firing shots after an argument with a security guard who asked him to put on a face mask.</p>

	<p>Masks are mandatory in indoor public places like the municipal services center, where residents apply for passports, obtain real estate documents and get help with other bureaucratic tasks.</p> <p>Russia's Interfax news agency reported, also citing an unnamed source, that a Glock handgun was found at the site of the shooting. Ownership of handguns and other short-barreled weapons is severely restricted in Russia. Only professional sports shooters are allowed to own them, and the weapons must be stored at shooting clubs.</p> <p>Russia's Investigative Committee has launched a criminal probe into the fatal shooting on charges of murder and illegal arms trafficking. If convicted, the assailant could face life in prison.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 FBI releases 2020 NIBRS data
SOURCE	https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-releases-2020-incident-based-data
GIST	<p>Today, the FBI released detailed data on nearly 8.9 million criminal offenses reported via the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) in 2020. The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program's latest report, <i>NIBRS, 2020</i>, presents data about 23 offense categories comprised of 52 offenses. It also presents arrest data for those crimes, as well as 10 additional categories for which only arrest data is collected.</p> <p>Highlights of <i>NIBRS, 2020</i></p> <p>In 2020, 9,880 law enforcement agencies, whose jurisdictions covered more than 177.5 million U.S. inhabitants, submitted NIBRS data to the UCR Program. These agencies accounted for 62.1% of the 15,901 law enforcement agencies that submitted data to the UCR Program in 2020. Currently, the FBI does not estimate NIBRS data for agencies that do not submit it.</p> <p>Of the 8,879,728 offenses reported in 7,560,867 incidents, 60.5% were crimes against property; 25.2% were crimes against persons; and 14.3% were crimes against society. (Due to rounding, some percentage breakdowns may not add to 100%.) Among these categories, the offenses most reported include larceny/theft offenses, assault offenses, and drug/narcotic offenses, respectively.</p> <p>Victims</p> <p>The 9,362,709 victims reported via NIBRS include individuals, businesses, institutions, or society as a whole. For 2020, the data regarding the 6,597,394 victims who were individuals reveal the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Of these victims, 23.8% were between 26 and 35 years old. A little more than half (50.6%) were female; 48.7% were male; and the gender of 0.8% of victims was unknown. Most victims (66.9%) were white; 24% were Black or African American; 1.9% were Asian; 0.8% were American Indian or Alaska Native; and 0.2% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. The race of 6.2% of victims was unknown. Data captured about the relationship of victims to their offenders show that just over half (50.1%) of the victims knew their offenders (or at least one offender when more than one was present) but did not have a familial relationship to them. Approximately one quarter (24.7%) of the victims were related to their offenders (or at least one offender when more than one was present). Of the remaining 25.2% of victims, the relationships to their offenders were categorized as strangers, mutual combatants (victim was offender), or unknown. <p>Known Offenders</p> <p>Law enforcement reported information about 7,173,072 known offenders, meaning some aspect of the suspect—such as age, gender, or race—was known.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Of these offenders, 38.2% were between 21 and 35 years of age. By gender, most offenders (62.1%) were male; 24.2% were female; and the gender for 13.7% of known offenders was unknown. By race, more than half (50.8%) of known offenders were white; 29.6% were Black or African American; and 2.2% were of other races. The race was unknown for 17.4% of reported known offenders.

Arrestees

Law enforcement agencies submitted data to the UCR Program through incident reports and arrest reports for 3,621,299 arrestees.

- Of these arrestees, 31.9% were 26 to 35 years of age.
- By gender, 72.6% were male; and 27.4% were female.
- By race, most arrestees (67.7%) were white; 27.1% were Black or African American; and 2.9% were of other races. The race was unknown for 2.2% of arrestees.

Agency-level NIBRS Data

State offense tables present statistics for each agency that reported 12 months of NIBRS data in 2020. In addition, federal offense tables present statistics for each federal agency that reported 12 months of NIBRS data.

Availability of NIBRS Data

2020 NIBRS data and companion documents are available exclusively on the Documents and Downloads page of the [FBI's Crime Data Explorer \(CDE\)](#). The downloadable files also provide details such as location, time of day, and clearances at the incident level.

Users can also access other types of data on the [CDE](#). Previous editions of the NIBRS publication contain [data from 2011 through 2019](#).

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Read the full [NIBRS, 2020](#) report.

HEADLINE	12/07 Saudi officials: France arrested wrong man
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/07/world/khashoggi-suspect-arrest-paris-airport-intl/
GIST	<p>Paris (CNN)A Saudi man detained in Paris has "nothing to do" with the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi authorities said Tuesday, responding to local media reports.</p> <p>The 33-year-old was detained at Charles de Gaulle Airport before his flight at 9:30 a.m. local time, and was traveling under a real passport, a spokesperson for the French National Police told CNN. He was placed in judicial detention, the spokesperson added.</p> <p>The suspect had been identified as Khaled Aedh Al-Otaibi, radio station RTL reported, citing French police and judicial sources. French police would not confirm the man's identity to CNN.</p> <p>However, a senior Saudi official told CNN that the detention is "believed to be a case of mistaken identity."</p> <p>By late Tuesday, the Saudi Embassy in France released a statement saying media reports were "incorrect" and "the person who was arrested has nothing to do with the case in question."</p> <p>The Embassy said it expects the Saudi citizen's "immediate release." It added that "the Saudi judiciary has issued verdicts against all of those who participated in the heinous murder of Jamal Khashoggi, all of them are currently serving their sentences," in a statement posted on Twitter.</p> <p>Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and a Washington Post columnist, was critical of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's policies. He was killed and allegedly dismembered on October 2, 2018, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by men with close ties to the highest levels of the Saudi government and bin Salman.</p> <p>Al-Otaibi was one of 16 individuals banned from the United States by the State Department in April 2019 for "their roles in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi."</p> <p>Likewise, the British government placed Al-Otaibi under sanctions in July 2020. The UK government said "he was involved in the unlawful killing of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul ... as part of the 15 man team sent</p>

to Turkey by Saudi authorities. He was involved in the concealment of evidence at the Saudi General Consul's residence following the killing."

If the suspect's identity is confirmed as Al-Otaibi, he would face arrest and a preliminary hearing Wednesday, a spokesperson for the Paris court of appeals told CNN -- potential first steps toward extradition. The court would not confirm the man's identity.

Khashoggi's former fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, told CNN in a statement that the arrest could be "a very significant first step for justice for Jamal" and urged justice to "be allowed to take its proper course."

"Those who executed the plan must not be used to shield those much higher up who gave the order for Jamal's brutal killing," Cengiz added.

A [US intelligence report](#) released in February found that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman approved the operation to capture or kill Khashoggi. The report also noted bin Salman's "absolute control" of Saudi intelligence and security operations.

Saudi's Foreign Ministry "completely rejected" the report.

There has been no official reaction from the Turkish authorities regarding the detention of the Saudi national by French police.

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HEADLINE	12/07 France: Khashoggi killing suspect arrested
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/suspect-killing-saudi-journalist-arrested-france-81612075
GIST	<p>PARIS -- A suspect in the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was arrested Tuesday in France, according to a French judicial official.</p> <p>The official said the suspect was being held on the basis of a Turkish arrest warrant. He requested not being named in accordance with the French justice system's customary practices.</p> <p>French radio RTL said the Saudi national, Khalid Aedh al-Otaibi, was arrested at the Roissy airport near Paris as he was trying to board a flight to Riyadh.</p> <p>Al-Otaibi was one of over a dozen Saudi officials sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury in 2018 over Khashoggi's killing and dismemberment at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018.</p> <p>He was also mentioned in the declassified U.S. intelligence report that said Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had "approved" the operation that killed Khashoggi. The report used an alternate English transliteration of his last name.</p> <p>The Saudi Embassy in Paris said the arrested man "had nothing to do with the case in question," and said the embassy expects his immediate release. It noted that Saudi Arabia already held a trial over the killing, though it was behind closed doors and the verdicts were criticized by rights groups and others for not holding to account or finding guilty anyone responsible behind organizing , ordering or overseeing the operation that killed Khashoggi.</p> <p>French authorities were on Tuesday evening verifying the suspect's identity.</p> <p>The director of media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Christophe Deloire, welcomed the news.</p> <p>"Sometimes governments close their eyes about people who are pursued by justice in another country. I note with satisfaction that there was an arrest, and the police didn't close their eyes this time," he told The Associated Press.</p>

Al-Otaibi “is someone we have been following for a long time,” Deloire said. RSF has lobbied multiple governments to seek justice for Khashoggi’s killing, and filed a lawsuit in Germany for crimes against humanity over the case.

There was no immediate comment from Turkey over the arrest.

French media report the suspect is going to be notified about the arrest warrant by a prosecutor on Wednesday. He can accept or refuse to be transferred to Turkey. If he refuses, a judge will decide whether he remains in custody pending the review of the case and a possible extradition process, which could take months.

The arrest comes as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman continues his first regional Gulf tour since the killing. He traveled Tuesday from Oman to the United Arab Emirates.

The prince met with French President Emmanuel Macron on Saturday in Saudi Arabia. Macron said they notably had talks about human right issues.

Hatice Cengiz, the fiancée of Jamal Khashoggi, said in a statement the arrest of the suspect, if confirmed, is “a very significant first step for justice for Jamal...Justice must be allowed to take its proper course... Most importantly, those who executed the plan must not be used to shield those much higher up who gave the order for Jamal’s brutal killing, including the Crown Prince himself. They must also be arrested and prosecuted.”

“If this is all true, this is the first step that should continue until justice is served and until the person who ordered the killing also faces justice,” said Abdullah Alaoudh, director of Gulf issues at DAWN, a U.S.-based organization envisioned by Khashoggi before his murder to support democracy and rule of law in the Arab world. Alaoudh’s own father, well-known Islamic scholar Salman Aloudah, is among those detained in the kingdom since 2017 under the crown prince. He was arrested shortly after a tweet perceived as not supportive of the Saudi embargo against neighboring Qatar at the time— a spat that has since ended.

The arrest comes as the crown prince works to move away from the stain on his reputation internationally and woo back big name Western investors and celebrities.

Human rights activists have urged celebrities and sports stars to boycott events in Saudi Arabia, arguing they serve to distract from the country’s crackdown on critics and that such events happen only with approval of the crown prince. Just this week alone, the kingdom hosted its first ever Formula One race with pop star Justin Bieber performing despite Khashoggi’s fiancée plea for him to not participate in protest. Meanwhile, stars like Hillary Swank and Catherine Deneuve were photographed on the red carpet Monday for the kingdom’s inaugural Red Sea International Film Festival in Jiddah.

Last year, Turkey began trying 26 Saudi nationals in absentia over Khashoggi’s murder after Saudi Arabia refused to extradite them and after Turkish officials dismissed a trial against some of the suspects that was conducted behind closed doors in Riyadh.

In the last hearing in November however, the court in Istanbul requested that the Ministry of Justice contact authorities in Saudi Arabia to determine whether they had been sentenced there to avoid them from being tried over the same offense.

The arrest in Paris comes as Turkey has been trying to improve its frayed relations with the Kingdom and other Arab nations at a time when its economy is faltering.

Khashoggi was killed on October 2, 2018, after he entered the consulate to get documents that would allow him to marry his Turkish fiancée, who was waiting outside. Turkish officials allege Khashoggi, who had written critically about Saudi Arabia’s crown prince for The Washington Post, was killed by a team of Saudi agents and then dismembered with a bone saw.

	<p>The Saudi government admitted to the murder under intense international pressure.</p> <p>The Saudi court proceedings, which were open to select Western diplomats to sit in on, were not open to independent media to observe.</p> <p>Khashoggi's family subsequently announced they had forgiven his killers.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 New Zealand: guilty plea mass stabbing
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/zealand-man-pleads-guilty-stabbing-supermarket-81614818
GIST	<p>WELLINGTON, New Zealand -- A New Zealand man who couldn't afford to buy beer at a supermarket pleaded guilty Wednesday to stabbing and injuring four people at the store during a frenzied attack.</p> <p>Luke James Lambert, 42, will face up to 14 years in prison when he is sentenced next year on four counts of attempted murder.</p> <p>Shoppers and staff at the Countdown supermarket in the city of Dunedin were praised for their bravery during the May attack after authorities said they managed to stop the man from hurting others. Three of the victims suffered severe wounds but all have since recovered.</p> <p>Less than four months after the attack by Lambert, an extremist inspired by the Islamic State group stabbed shoppers at an Auckland supermarket in an unrelated attack, injuring seven before he was shot and killed by police.</p> <p>In the earlier attack, prosecutors said Lambert visited the supermarket and bought a soda drink but didn't have enough money to buy two cans of beer, according to the Otago Daily Times newspaper.</p> <p>He later complained to an associate about not getting access to medication, although authorities could find no evidence he was denied any prescription drugs.</p> <p>"Someone's going to get it," Lambert told his associate, according to the newspaper.</p> <p>Lambert then returned to the store and grabbed a pack of four knives from a shelf and slashed the face of a worker who was stocking items in the pharmacy aisle.</p> <p>He then climbed on top of her and continued stabbing her, saying he was going to kill her. As a store manager and two shoppers tried to intervene, he stabbed them as well, the newspaper reported, citing court documents.</p> <p>Supermarket staff, shoppers and off-duty police managed to restrain Lambert at the store and perform first aid on the victims, helping to save lives.</p> <p>New Zealand Police Superintendent Paul Basham said at the time their actions were "nothing short of heroic."</p> <p>Lambert is scheduled to be sentenced in May.</p> <p>Dunedin is home to about 130,000 people, including a large number of students who attend the University of Otago.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Arrest: Palestinian girl stabs Israel woman
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/police-israeli-stabbed-jerusalem-suspect-flees-foot-81617777

GIST	<p>JERUSALEM -- An Israeli woman was stabbed and lightly wounded in a tense neighborhood in east Jerusalem on Wednesday. The suspect, a Palestinian female minor, fled the scene and was later arrested inside a nearby school, police said.</p> <p>The Israeli woman was taken to the trauma unit of the nearby Hadassah Mt. Scopus Hospital, which said the 26-year-old was conscious and in stable condition.</p> <p>The stabbing took place in Sheikh Jarrah, where several Palestinian extended families are at risk of being evicted by Jewish settlers amid a decades-long legal battle. Protests and clashes with police there last spring helped ignite the 11-day Gaza war.</p> <p>Sirens could be heard echoing across the neighborhood as traffic was backed up by the morning commute.</p> <p>The attack came days after a Palestinian stabbed and wounded an Israeli man and tried to stab a member of the paramilitary Border Police just outside Jerusalem's Old City, about a mile (1.6 kilometers) from Sheikh Jarrah. The Border Police shot and killed the attacker.</p> <p>Last month, a Hamas militant opened fire in Jerusalem's Old City, killing one Israeli and wounding four others before being fatally shot by police.</p> <p>Israel captured east Jerusalem, including the Old City and major holy sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, in the 1967 war and annexed it in a move not recognized internationally. It considers the entire city its unified capital.</p> <p>The Palestinians want east Jerusalem to be the capital of their future state. The city's fate was one of the thorniest issues in peace talks that ground to a halt more than a decade ago.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Delphi murders: probe in fake model profile
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/delphi-murders-police-investigating-fake-model-profile-contacted/story?id=81603454
GIST	<p>Police investigating the mysterious Delphi, Indiana, murders are looking for the person who, they said, created fake Snapchat and Instagram profiles, posed as a wealthy male model and contacted underage girls.</p> <p>Delphi eighth-graders Abby Williams, 13, and Libby German, 14, were killed on Feb. 13, 2017 while walking on a local hiking trail. The girls had documented some of their walk on Snapchat. Years later, no arrests have been made.</p> <p>While investigating the double killing, authorities found a fake online profile called "anthony_shots," which used photos of a known male model and communicated with underage girls "to solicit nude images, obtain their addresses, and attempt to meet them," Indiana State Police said in a news release Monday. Anthony_shots "portrayed himself as being extremely wealthy and owning numerous sports cars," police said.</p> <p>Authorities are now looking for information about the person who created the anthony_shots profile, which was used in 2016 and 2017 on Snapchat and Instagram, police said.</p> <p>The male model in the photos has been identified and isn't a person of interest, police said.</p> <p>Police asked anyone who communicated with, met with or tried to meet the anthony_shots profile to contact law enforcement at abbyandlibbytip@cacoshrf.com or 765-822-3535. Indiana State Police spokesman Sgt. Jeremy Piers wouldn't say if Abby and Libby communicated with the fake profile. The Delphi case has been a mystery for years.</p>

	<p>Soon after Abby and Libby were killed, authorities released a grainy image of the suspect, who they say was on the hiking trail the day the girls went missing. State police in 2019 released video footage from Libby's phone; the brief video clip showed a grainy image of the suspect walking on the bridge near where the girls were last seen.</p> <p>Police also publicized the suspect's voice -- a recording of him saying "down the hill" -- which was recovered from Libby's phone.</p> <p>Police in 2019 released a new suspect sketch that officials said was based on a witness' recollection of what he or she saw.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 L.A. triple shooting outside school
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/13-year-boy-killed-year-girl-wounded-los/story?id=81604069
GIST	<p>A shooting outside a Los Angeles elementary school left a 13-year-old boy dead and two people critically wounded, including a 9-year-old girl who was hit by a stray bullet while on a playground, authorities said.</p> <p>The violent episode marked the latest in an escalating number of shootings in Los Angeles, which has seen a 12% increase in homicides and a nearly 14% jump in shooting incidents this year as compared to 2020, according to Los Angeles Police Department crime statistics.</p> <p>Gunfire erupted shortly before 5 p.m. on Monday outside the Wilmington Park Elementary School when at least two gunmen walked up to an occupied vehicle stopped near the school and opened fire, according to police.</p> <p>The boy who was killed and a 20-year-old woman were inside the apparently targeted Dodge Durango, police said. The wounded woman drove several blocks from the shooting scene and called 911, police said.</p> <p>The gravely wounded child was taken to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead, Los Angeles Fire Department officials told ABC station KABC in Los Angeles. The female driver was in critical condition at a hospital Monday night, officials said.</p> <p>The 9-year-old girl, a fourth grader, was on the playground at Wilmington Park Elementary School as part of an after-school program when she was struck by a stray bullet and critically injured, school officials said.</p> <p>"She was in the schoolyard just playing, just doing what a 9-year-old is supposed to do," LAPD Capt. Adrian Gonzalez told reporters at the scene.</p> <p>Police officials said officers initially suspected two separate shootings occurred but after speaking to witnesses determined the shootings were connected.</p> <p>No arrests have been made and a motive was under investigation, police said.</p> <p>The shooting left parents of students at the school shocked and frightened for their own children.</p> <p>"It's sad and scary," Maria Garcia, whose daughter attends the school, told KABC. "I'm always paranoid. I'm always scared. I'm always checking on her, always calling her, always making sure she's OK and safe."</p> <p>Los Angeles has had at least 352 homicides through the end of November, up from 314 at this time last year, according to police department crime statistics. The city has also recorded 1,328 shooting victims, up from 1,168 at this time last year, the statistics show.</p> <p>"This is such a tragedy. Gun violence has destroyed too many lives in this country and tonight it has terrorized another community," Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn, who represents the</p>

	Wilmington area, wrote on Twitter Monday night. "I am praying for the family of this little boy and for the recovery of the little girl and young woman."
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